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AN HOUR OF AMERICAN DRAMA

By
BARRETT H. CLARK
Author of
"A Study of the Modern Drama"
"Eugene O'Neill"
&c.

PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON
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WITHDRAWN

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FOR PAUL GREEN

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WITHDRAWN

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AN HOUR OF AMERICAN DRAMA

INTRODUCTION

HERE is an informal record of effort and achievement, a sort of retrospective diary set down from memory and freely supplemented by letters and chats with playwrights, managers, and critics. I am concerned largely with the phenomena as I have watched them for the past fifteen years, rather than with the categories and classifications of literary history.

My story has to do with the recent appearance of an adult drama in America, and with those writers who are consistently and consciously writing American plays. I am almost wholly interested in plays and playwrights, and not in the theater, the actor, the director or any of the other servants, assistants or collaborators of the playwright.

While I believe that no entirely satisfactory record of the development of the theater can be written by arbitrarily limiting the field to any one category of activity, I think it just as true that the whole history of the theater cannot logically be considered apart from a record of the manners, morals, ideas and politics of the epoch and land where it

flourished. Any attempt to treat one subject without treating all the other subjects related, however remotely, to it, must lead the historian into exaggeration and distort his viewpoint. I should like to see history written by those who are not specialists in any one subject, but can this ever be done by anyone?

In my short study I cannot go beyond the limits I have mentioned, and I ask you to bear in mind that I claim no more than the privilege of any contemporary in telling about things that happen to interest me without trying to explain them at great length.

. . . . . .

Within ten years the American drama has come into its own. What was a hope, an aim, a dream for more than a generation is now largely a fact. What has happened with fiction, science, commerce and industry, has happened with the drama, only most of us don't know it yet.

It probably disconcerts the academically-minded to watch new dramatists appear on the horizon who cannot be linked with the past history either of our theater or our drama, young men who spring up from nowhere, who have little or no knowledge or

experience of theatrical matters, who take it into their heads to create their own kind of plays out of material found in the most out-of-the-way corners. They cannot be accounted for as links in a chain, nor as heirs to an ancient and honorable past; they are evidences of an awakening of a national consciousness. Many of our young native dramatists were born on farms; others come from the small towns; still others from the cities; very few are New Yorkers, and—of the writers who really count—none has had any long or very close connection with the theater business.

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that aside from the able craftsmen who can be counted on to manufacture popular shows for wholesale consumption, our new dramatists are not professionals. They are not members of local cliques; not many belong to New York clubs or coteries; they have few friends among the managers, critics or actors. The staff-dramatist of the past who was paid a regular salary to turn out so many plays a year for a manager is today a rarity. The professional dramatist of the past—like Charles Klein, Bronson Howard, Augustus Thomas and Clyde Fitch—was

the best we had; but at his best he was rarely more than a writer of agreeable little fictions put together usually with the suggestions of actor and manager for the purpose of keeping a theater open and making money for himself and his co-workers.

A similar situation exists today, and we have not fewer but more playwrights whose job it is to write shows for actors and managers, to alter and cut manuscripts in order to please the box-office patrons. The work of such men as Owen Davis and Willard Mack is sometimes exceedingly clever and nearly always entertaining; for years Winchell Smith and Roi Cooper Megrue could be counted on to capture the popular fancy nearly every time they produced a play. You need only go through the ten volumes of Burns Mantle's *Best Plays* series to see how many capable theatrical carpenters we have among us. It is these men—and women, for we have our women carpenters as well, and two or three who are something besides—constituting the great average, who will go into history as authors of crook plays and light comedies, farces and melodramas, good for a season or two on the stage and after having been rendered more commonplace

than ever, tamed into the standardized products of Hollywood.

Our theater and drama have on the whole been conscientiously studied and recorded in several books. In 1832 William Dunlap published his *History of the American Theater*; he was followed in the Nineteenth Century by Ireland and Seilhamer, and in the Twentieth by Moses, Hornblow, Quinn and Odell. I refer the reader to the books of the last four mentioned. These are the fullest and best.

In my brief summing up of the drama of the past I have referred constantly to these works and of course to the manuscripts and printed texts of many hundreds of plays. But my story begins a short time after the close of the works of Mr. Moses and Professor Quinn.

PAST AND PRESENT

OUR past is always changing; and it will continue to change in the light of the present because we know that nothing is except in its relation to everything else.

Not long ago a friend of mine who spent his savings as a lad to see plays in the eighties, was looking over the contents of a packing-box that Dion Boucicault put into storage forty years ago. We were examining manuscript copies of *The Jilt* and *The Streets of New York* and a few other plays that my friend had wept over and thrilled to, and he turned to me with a sigh:

"What's happened?" he said, "These old things seem mostly junk to me. Is it just that I'm getting old? Or did they act these plays so much better forty years ago? I wonder will O'Neill and Howard, Barry and Kelly seem so out-of-date when you're forty years older?"

Now if I am wrong time will punish me, but I said to the gallery god that while I thought *Desire Under the Elms, The Silver Cord, White Wings* and *The Show-Off* would naturally seem out-of-date in certain

respects to playgoers in 1970, they would not look as absurd as *After Dark* and *Under the Gaslight* do to us today. And this would not be a matter of time, nor a revolution alone in manner and style.

"The plays you saw," I said, "are absurd to us because most of them are not true. They are written in a false and rhetorical style; they have to do nearly always with types, and their plots are manufactured. In the last analysis they are not life, but patchwork, arranged into patterns designed by clever craftsmen to produce a known and definite effect on the audience."

It is not the quaintness of the language and the labored style of these plays that has caused them to be forgotten, it is the fundamental fact that they are the products of superficial writers, of men who could say and believe that "plays are not written but re-written," an epigram appropriately attributed to Boucicault, Bronson Howard, Augustin Daly, Augustus Thomas, and a dozen other able playmakers. The kind of plays these men wrote were indeed re-written; they had to be. But here "re-written" means picked apart, built up, "lifted" like a dowager's face, put on a diet, painted

and rouged. If a dramatist had a scene that wouldn't fit in his "original dramatic comedy in five acts" he put it away in the hope that when his "original melodrama in nineteen scenes" was ready to go into rehearsal, it could be used there, as it often was.

We have been told a dozen times of David Belasco's method of writing plays, and shown photographs of screens covered with scraps of paper, each one having a scene or a suggestion for a scene on it. The scene from *The Girl of the Golden West* where the fugitive's presence is discovered by the falling of a drop of blood on the sheriff's hand was doubtless described on one of these papers, and utilized ultimately in the melodrama that was once described as an American masterpiece.

Well, I don't intend to be too nasty about the plays that delighted our forefathers in the past century. The scissors and paste-pot drama of Boucicault and the others has its place in our history along with *Godey's Lady's Book,* Currier and Ives prints, Sandwich glass, Anthony Comstock and the Tweed Ring. There is no need of my arguing the question at length: I declare flatly there is no play written by an American (or by

any foreigner who, like Boucicault, did most of his writing for our theater) from the very earliest days down to 1900, let us say, that's in any way comparable as a work of art to even the average second-rate fiction or verse produced in this country during the same period. It would be absurd to claim that the very finest plays of Payne, Dunlap, Boker, Boucicault, Harrigan, Howard or Herne are as genuine, as interesting, as estimable as the work of Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Whitman, or Henry James.

Up to a few years ago our native drama was a minor affair. Read the plays reprinted in the valuable and historically interesting anthologies of Mr. Moses and Professor Quinn, and maintain if you can that during the 18th or 19th century there was a single one worth reading or reviving, except for historical or sentimental reasons.

It has been claimed and argued that our contemporary playwrights are the heirs of the past. In a way they are, but not of the past of our own native drama. I seriously doubt if Sidney Howard ever read a line of Payne or Dunlap, or even as an infant saw *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Rip Van Winkle*; Eugene O'Neill saw his father's *Monte*

Cristo and possibly a few other old-timers; Philip Barry has seen more foreign plays in Europe during one month than he had older American plays during his entire life-time; while Paul Green when he came to write his first one-acter had never read nor seen any play except *Hamlet*.

Our minds are curious transformers and most of us are victims of an instinct to generalize and bring order into the chaos of our knowledge. It is a common error with critics to claim that so-and-so the novelist has brought his art to its perfection because he carried on his technique from the point where his predecessor left off. Our literary histories are full of this sort of reasoning. How familiar we are with such chapter headings as "The Development of the Drama from Gorboduc to the Close of the Theaters in 1642," "The Rise of the Sonnet," and the like. Of course there is occasionally just enough evidence to warrant our applying this doctrine of evolution or perfectibility; for example, the sonnet as written by Shakespeare is a lovelier thing than it was in the hands of Wyatt and Surrey. But literary and artistic influences cannot logically be traced very far according to any system of

chronology or geography; intermingled with them are a thousand other influences far less tangible. An explanation after the fact can be made to sound plausible, but I've never been able to accept one unless it was made in the form of a prediction and later on proved by the result. The miracle of Shakespeare's appearance has been glibly accounted for unnumbered times: the spirit of the age, the effect of the Italian Renaissance, the rising enthusiasm for war and discovery; the pursuit of philosophy, etc. Is it not nearer the truth to say that the chief reason for the appearance of William Shakespeare was that John Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon, with no notion of doing the philosophical critics a favor, was attracted to Mary Arden, married her and begot a child, presumably because that was a natural, agreeable and quite unphilosophical thing to do? And the child was sent to school and in the course of time found he could write plays and poetry. The Zeitgeist was probably abroad then, but it was not and never has been a driving power so much as a convenient phrase.

In other words, while it may be possible to explain why any given artist wrote or painted in such and such a way, it is not

possible to tell us why he appeared on the scene when and where he did.

Since I believe this is true I can't be expected to swallow the hypothesis of evolution in art. Jules Lemaître once said of the monumental critical theory constructed by Brunetière:

> M. Brunetière is incapable, it seems, of considering any work . . . except in its relations with a group of other works, whose relations with other groups throughout time and space are immediately evident to him, and so on. . . . How sad it must be not to be able to open a book without remembering others and without comparing it with them! . . . Our errors are without consequence; they are not bound up with one another; they only concern particular cases. If M. Brunetière, on the other hand, made a mistake, it would be frightful, for besides the fact that he would have had no pleasure in his error, it would be without help or remedy; it would be total and irreparable; it would be the wreck of his whole being.

If, then, I am to believe that our present-day writers are the result of the work of earlier writers; if we are to look upon Eugene O'Neill as our reward for a hundred and fifty years' experimenting, someone must explain why the plays of Æschylus remain among the masterpieces of the world, and why Bach is today unsurpassed in the profundity of his conceptions.

No, our contemporaries have been influenced probably least of all by the plays of their own land. At their best, indeed, they owe to life itself, the life of this country, more than they owe to the drama of any other land or epoch. It is their distinction that their roots are sunk into the ground rather than in the theater. They have used the theater and made it an instrument, and in so doing have given it a meaning and a dignity it never had before.

A GLANCE AT THE PAST

In the days when Augustus Thomas, Clyde Fitch and Charles Klein were at the height of their popularity I was going to high school. I graduated in 1908, and began going to the theater with some regularity. That year saw the production of George Ade's *Father and the Boys,* George Cohan's *Yankee Prince* and *The American Idea,* Rachel Crothers' *Myself, Bettina,* William De Mille's *Royal Mounted,* Clyde Fitch's *Honor of the Family, Girls,* and *The Blue Mouse,* James Forbes' *Traveling Salesman,* Percy MacKaye's *Mater,* Edward Sheldon's *Salvation Nell,* Tarkington and Wilson's

Man From Home, Eugene Walter's *Paid in Full, The Wolf,* and *The Easiest Way.*

I remember hearing that *Salvation Nell* was a remarkable play by a Harvard undergraduate in his teens, and it was predicted that young Sheldon was the Coming American Dramatist. The same thing was said about *The Easiest Way,* but with reservations, for that was "rather spicy"—about a woman who—you know! This I gathered from the "artistic" boys in college.

The next year a University professor at my own Alma Mater wrote a play that was actually produced. In its earlier form it had been called *The Sabine Woman,* but there was a suggestion of indelicacy in the title, and maybe Henry Miller and Margaret Anglin thought the classical allusion would be lost. So it was called *The Great Divide.*

Here was a play that made me palpitate. My freshman emotions were stirred by the purple patches of the gifted poet. I haven't dared turn again to the text for that monologue addressed to a bunch of roses—"You dark beauties ——!"

William Vaughan Moody was the next

to be loudly acclaimed as the Coming American Dramatist.

Then there were others, chief among them that arch-propagandist, Percy MacKaye, the eternally youthful idealist who has squandered his gifts in preaching the doctrine of a national drama and in digging up for others the unsuspected treasures of our native folklore. He will stand high in the annals of our new drama. Living in a world that looked for practical results, Percy MacKaye was after other things; often he was on the wrong track, but every once in a while, as in *The Scarecrow*, he hit the nail on the head.

During college years most of my time was spent in seeing and reading new plays, and producing them in the Dramatic Club when the faculty weren't looking. Robert Herrick conducted a course there in Modern Drama and one in Playwriting, and the ever-encouraging and amiable Percy Boynton invited some of the boys to his home once a week where they discussed Ibsen and Shaw. Twenty years ago college professors who did that sort of thing (especially at Chicago) ran the risk of losing caste among their superiors. Theodore B. Hinckley was at the

same time getting the high school youngsters to read and act modern plays, even by American writers. Did we discuss contemporary Americans? Oh, yes. We read Fitch (two or three plays were published then) and a few others, and even seriously studied the "ideas" of Augustus Thomas. We really did.

And for four years we watched the promising young Americans promise, and pass on to popular success and other forms of failure. Occasionally we grew enthusiastic, as when *The Yellow Jacket* came to town, or *Kindling,* or *Rebellion.* Then there were the Irish Players, and the Russian troupes; Ibsen productions and Shaw's *Man and Superman* and *Candida.*

From the days I wore short trousers Chicago was a hot-bed of Little and Experimental theaters. Many a night have I watched the Donald Robertson Players manfully struggling with Björnson and Ibsen, Echegaray and Giacosa, Voltaire and Goldoni; and even Milton's *Comus*! Then there was Maurice Browne's diminutive Little Theater, "arty" and "advanced," giving Shaw and Euripides, but the wiry little director commanded our respect.

I recall how two or three of the local organizations tried out original plays (that's what they were called), written by Americans: I dimly remember one by Robert Herrick, and another by Henry Kitchell Webster.

Dramatic Messiahs had come for a season, and gone either into the movies or a decline, as in the case of Walter and Sheldon.

And as we grew more sophisticated we weren't quite so ready to see in every clever youngster the long-awaited American Playwright.

Many of us went to Europe, beginning in 1909 and 1910. I did, and when Europeans asked me what we were doing in the theater I said nothing about Fitch or Klein or Thomas, and little about the younger men, and the Europeans smiled indulgently, saying we would have a native drama in time: "Your country is still so young."

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW GENERATION

More and more of us went to Europe, and between 1912 and 1916 we discovered the European theater. Not so much the drama as methods of production, the cyclorama, the

Fortuny lighting system, etc. We came home prattling about Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, Reinhardt and the half-legendary Gordon Craig, master of them all.

Shortly after I returned from Germany in 1914 I met a group of eager young men and women at a Fifth Avenue exhibition of foreign stage-designs. Sheldon Cheney introduced me to a grave but youthful fellow with a beard—name of Jones—he'd been working under Reinhardt—looking for a job now—hadn't got a dime to buy his next meal with. Maybe that wasn't the literal truth, but it was near enough. Then there were boys just graduated from Harvard; that lanky youth was Kenneth Macgowan—a critic or something. And there was Fenimore Merrill, a young playwright who had done good things under Professor Baker. Samuel A. Eliot was there, and Mrs. Isaacs, and Irving Pichel. Possibly not all of them at that particular exhibit; at any rate these people were stirring and talking, writing articles, making stage-models. Hiram Motherwell and Sheldon Cheney had just published their books on European stagecraft, and a little later Cheney started his *Theater Arts* magazine.

SAM HUME

But two or three years before the events I have just mentioned Sam Hume had begun to function at Cambridge. I remember evenings at Sam's apartment with Gardiner Hale and Tim Spelman, Fenimore Merrill, and a dozen others; we drank Sam's claret and scotch and got terribly excited over his stage-designs and models. Professor Baker (they called him Uncle George then) watched these youngsters and quietly enjoyed their enthusiasm when they were busy in his little workshop. At any rate he was always ready to let them try their hand at designing scenes and costumes, and mounting plays.

Though Hume has kept his old interest in the theater, his subsequent contribution to it is not nearly so impressive as it was nearly twenty years ago, when, his eyes bulging with excitement, he managed to communicate his own ardor to the students who enjoyed his hospitality month after month.

"Theater Arts"

Turn to your files of *Theater Arts* and see Vol. 1, No. 1, dated November, 1916.

The editor outlines his policy with becoming modesty, and ends with a P. S.: "We intend not to be swallowed by the movies." The first article is devoted to the Cranbrook Masque, with a photograph of the new Michigan outdoor theater. Walter Prichard Eaton writes on *Acting and the New Stagecraft*; Cheney describes Cloyd Head's *Grotesques* at the Chicago Little Theater. There are notes and criticisms on young designers of scenery, new theaters, costumes, and a special article on *The Art Societies*, together with notes on the *Progress of the Theater Arts*. Here are news items on the Wisconsin Players, The Neighborhood Playhouse, The Washington Square Players, and Stuart Walker's Portmanteau Theatre. Among the productions at Little Theaters I find Arthur Davison Ficke's *Mr. Faust* at the Chicago Little Theater, *The Hero of Santa Maria* by Ben Hecht and Kenneth Sawyer Goodman at the Chicago Players' Workshop; Zoe Akins' *Magical City* done by the Lake Forest Players. Elsewhere (I note only American authors) are plays by Alice Gerstenberg, Oren Taft, Jr., Ruth Sawyer, and Frank Tompkins.

See the names on the board of contributing

editors, Winthrop Ames, Maurice Browne, Walter Prichard Eaton, Clayton Hamilton, Sam Hume, Percy MacKaye, Hiram Kelly Motherwell, Ruth St. Denis, and Thomas Wood Stevens.

LITTLE THEATERS

Now pick up the next number, February, 1917—page 90. Here, and on the following page under the caption *At the Little Theaters* you will find mentioned productions of plays by the following Americans: Witter Bynner, Ben Hecht, Kenneth Sawyer Goodman, Maxwell Bodenheim, Neith Boyce, Rita Wellman, and Eugene O'Neill. The Provincetown Players, "who produce at their workshop theater in New York, plays written by their members, presented in early January. . . . *Fog* by Eugene O'Neill. The February bill included *The Sniper,* by the same author."

Without anyone's knowing it at the time, these little notes announced the beginning of a new epoch in American drama. There was no beating of drums and nowhere, so far as I can discover, any article prophesying that out of the modest experiments in Macdougal Street was to come a man who would take

his place among the very few firstrate playwrights of our time.

O'NEILL'S FIRST

O'Neill's first play in New York was *Before Breakfast,* produced by the Provincetown people December 1, 1916. All the one-acters except *In the Zone* (which was done by the Washington Square Players in 1917) were seen in Macdougal Street. Of these there were ten in all.

Then, on February 2, 1920, John D. Williams produced *Beyond the Horizon* at the Morosco Theater. Note the date, and let us be arbitrary in this arbitrary little study, leaving to later historians the job of fixing another as the beginning of our era of adult playwriting. Certainly O'Neill is our first man-sized dramatist, and *Beyond the Horizon* his first acted full-length play. The same year George Tyler tried out *Chris Christopherson* in Atlantic City, and the Provincetown Players put on *Exorcism,* a one-acter, *The Emperor Jones,* and *Diff'rent.* Three long plays were done in 1921, including *Anna Christie,* and two the following year.

After the success of *Anna Christie,* it was

clear that O'Neill was not one of those promising young men who had so often disappointed us, and this impression was confirmed by the appearance of *The Hairy Ape*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Great God Brown*, and *Marco Millions*.

In spite of the failure of *Welded* and *The Fountain*, O'Neill was recognized as a playwright of extraordinary power. His greatest success with the public was with *Strange Interlude*, produced by the Theater Guild in January 1928, which ran in New York until June of the following year, with another company on the road. *Dynamo*, his latest produced play, also put on by the Theater Guild, was not successful.

The trouble here was not, as some critics claimed, that O'Neill was showing signs of a general weakness or had entirely failed in what he started out to do, but that he was trying to do what no artist can and remain an artist. He endeavored to use the theater as a means of putting over an idea which presumably interested him. But in this case the idea was not striking and the means used to express it were for the most part nearly as uninteresting.

Yet O'Neill is so crammed with energy and so fertile in invention that he can afford —at the age of forty-two—to try his hand at anything that attracts his fancy.

EUGENE O'NEILL

What is the background of this man who is the first of our new generation of playwrights? I think the best and most concise statement of his beginnings is the letter he wrote me in 1919, which I have reprinted elsewhere:

I am thirty. My undergraduate college education was confined to a freshman year at Princeton University, class of 1910. My first job was secretary of a mail order firm in New York. In 1909 I went with a mining engineer on a gold prospecting trip to Spanish Honduras, Central America. At the end of six months I was invalided home—tropical malarial fever—no gold. After that I became assistant manager of a theatrical company touring the East and Middle West. My first voyage to sea followed—sixty-five days on a Norwegian barque, Boston to Buenos Aires. In Argentine I worked at various occupations—in the draughting department of the Westinghouse Electrical Company, in the wool house of a packing plant at La Plata, in the office of the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Buenos Aires. Followed another voyage at sea, tending mules in a cattle steamer, Buenos Aires to Durban, (South) Africa, and return. After that a lengthy period of complete destitution in Buenos

Aires—"on the beach"—terminated by my signing on as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound home for New York. My final experience at sea followed soon after this—able seaman on the American Line, New York-Southampton. The next winter I played a part in my father's vaudeville version of *Monte Cristo*, touring the Far West. Then I worked as reporter on the New London, Connecticut, *Telegraph*. My health broke down, my lungs being affected, and I spent six months in a sanatorium thinking it over. It was in this enforced period of reflection that the urge to write first came to me. The next fall—I was twenty-four—I began my first play—*The Web*. In 1914-1915 I was a student in Professor Baker's English 47 at Harvard. The Summer of 1916 I spent at Provincetown. It was during that summer the Provincetown Players, who have made the original productions of nearly all my short plays in New York, were first organized.

It isn't necessary to expand this or bring it up to date: all I want is to let O'Neill explain in his own words where he came from and tell what urged him to begin writing. I think it's clear that the impulse was the result of a strong desire to express his feelings and ideas about the world as he knew it, especially about the men and women he had known and imagined. It is also evident [and this O'Neill has personally confirmed] that he did not set out deliberately to write plays just for the sake of being a dramatist. His first writing was in the form of verse,

conventional imitative stuff contributed to a "Colyum" in The New London *Telegraph*. When—at the Sanatorium—he discovered that he had to express himself more fully, he turned to drama because it was the medium he knew best.

But here is something curious: his first plays were so different from the kind of thing understood by his father that James O'Neill saw little in them and was worried over Eugene's future, believing the boy ought to undertake something that would enable him to make a living. O'Neill's early work was in many ways, I think, a reaction against the drama as practised in the Palmy Days when his father was a popular actor. The lad who sneered at *Monte Cristo* was not likely to use the same facile tricks that endeared that melodrama to the audiences of its time.

O'Neill was interested in life more than in anything else, except the artistic means of projecting life into his plays, and he has never gone out of his way to serve the theater. He wasn't at all interested in making a go of his business; that is why he has kept away from the theater, living almost like a recluse, and minding his own affairs. "I in-

tend," he once wrote, "to use whatever I can make my own, to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits or can be invented to fit the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: Is it the truth as I know it—or, better still, feel it? If so, shoot, and let the splinters fly wherever they may. If not, not. . . . I want to do what gives me pleasure and worth in my own eyes, and don't care to do what doesn't. . . . It is just life that interests me as a thing in itself."

Contrast this with the words of Eugene Walter: ". . . In its essence, playwriting is a trade; . . . it must be mastered by thoughtful absorption of fundamental rules of construction and ethics. . . ."

THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS

Among the young writers who belong to what I'll call the first generation of the Provincetown Players only Susan Glaspell, besides O'Neill, has gone on writing plays, though several others have become poets and writers of fiction: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Alfred Kreymborg, Harry Kemp, Djuna Barnes, Floyd Dell, Wilbur Daniel

Steele. Others still are dead: George Cram Cook, John Reed, and Fenimore Merrill. Of these Merrill would, I think, have developed into a dramatist of unusual skill.

SUSAN GLASPELL

Miss Glaspell is herself the author of three long plays, and she collaborated with Norman Matson on *The Comic Artist*, which is recent and as yet not produced. *Bernice*, done by the Provincetown Players in 1919, is the most original of all her plays. Why it has not been revived I can't understand. *Inheritors*, which is less interesting, was acted for a time by the Civic Repertory Theater players of Eva Le Gallienne, but it is a rather naïve bit of special pleading.

The Verge, which I think has never been acted, is (like *Bernice*) a carefully developed study in personality, but not especially dramatic.

Except for *Suppressed Desires*, a gay and inconsequential one-acter written with George Cram Cook and *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell's plays have not seemed to interest the American theater-going public. Though I believe *Bernice* to be one of the half-dozen best

American plays ever written by a woman, Miss Glaspell does not quite belong to the theater. Her best work is in *The Road to the Temple* and her novels. Yet we need her. Will she go on writing plays? Is there a theater that will see in them what is there?

But if the young men and women who wrote for the Provincetown Players during the first five or six years of their existence have not—with the exception of O'Neill and Miss Glaspell—become dramatists, was the venture of "Jig" Cook worthwhile? It was. There was something intangible in what Cook wanted to do, something too that could not be expressed in the regular theater at the time without sounding off-key, affected. Susan Glaspell, writing a decade later about the first summer at Provincetown when she and Cook and a dozen others wrote and produced one-act plays, says: "It might have ended there. . . . people giving plays in the summer, if it hadn't been—Do you remember Jig's dream city, how there was to be a theater, and 'why not write our own plays and put them on ourselves, giving writer, actor, designer, a chance to work together without the commercial thing im-

posed from without? A whole community working together, developing unsuspected talents. The city ought to furnish the kind of audience that will cause new plays to be written.' 'The Will to Form the Beloved Community of Life-Givers'—that is written through the papers of his years."

The Provincetown Players, first under Cook, and later in a wholly reorganized form, under a different name and with several new directors, have persisted and to this day, in spite of financial handicaps, the Experimental Theater, Inc., offers a sort of haven of refuge to just the sort of playwrights Cook had it in his mind to encourage. Not to all, however, for it too has its blind spots and prejudices. In their later years, as at first, they made errors of judgment and taste, but throughout their history you can trace clearly the policy that James Light, the present director, had laid down in his quiet determined manner: "We're trying to encourage new dramatists to write honestly, and giving them a chance. We have no set ideas as to the kind of play, so long as the writer has something interesting or beautiful to say."

You have only to look over the list of

plays produced to see what the Provincetown people have accomplished. If the early organization was the first to give O'Neill and Susan Glaspell a hearing, the reorganized company was the first to sponsor the work of Em Jo Basshe, E. E. Cummings, Paul Green, and Virgil Geddes.

[As the proofs of these pages go back to the printer, word comes that the Experimental Theater has failed: no business, red-tape, timid backers, and a poor season are all blamed for the catastrophe.]

THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PLAYERS

The Washington Square Players came into existence in the spring of 1915. The young people who founded it were in the habit of meeting in the Washington Square Book Shop and at "Polly's" Restaurant. They were described as a "group of actors, artists, and authors interested in stimulating and developing new and artistic methods of acting and producing and writing for the American stage." Among those in the group were Edward Goodman, Lawrence Langner, Robert Edmond Jones, Samuel A. Eliot, Jr., Helen

Westley, Lee Simonson, Philip Moeller, and Ralph Roeder.

They opened at the Bandbox Theater in East 57th Street, New York, with Maeterlinck's *Interior,* Basil Lawrence's (Lawrence Langner's) *Licensed,* Edward Goodman's *Eugenically Speaking,* and *Another Interior,* by an anonymous writer. The program was so successful that additional performances were given, and new bills of one-acters introduced. The Bandbox was rented for the entire season of 1915-16, and eight weekly performances were given instead of four. The following year the Players moved down to the Comedy Theater in West 41st Street where they remained until the fall of 1917. Then came, as Oliver Sayler writes, "financial difficulties, the exhaustion of the one-act play, thwarted longing for longer forms, the war. Demoralization, discouragement, dissolution."

Twenty-seven American plays had been seen at the Bandbox and the Comedy, and twenty-three foreign. Americans who saw their plays done for the first time were Philip Moeller, Lewis Beach, Lawrence Langner, Zoe Akins, "Bosworth Crocker," Zona Gale, Theodore Dreiser, and Elmer

Rice. In 1917 a few full-length plays were offered as special bills, but only one of these was by an American.

The most important writers whose plays were done by the Players were O'Neill and Susan Glaspell, both of whom had been writing for the Provincetowners before. But there were others, who may more properly be designated as genuine products, men who have gone on writing plays: Lewis Beach, Philip Moeller, and Lawrence Langner.

The mere existence of this group attracted writers who either could not or would not write for the ordinary conventional theater, and in some cases it no doubt put the notion of trying to write into their heads.

So far as the encouragement and development of new American playwrights was concerned, the Washington Square Players were not quite so influential as the Provincetown Players. For one thing, their interests were wider, and in spite of their own stated policies, they were just as much interested in foreign plays as they were in native. Even at the time this discrepancy was noticed, and Waldo Frank took the Players to task for it: "These spirits of revolt—Andrieff, Wedekind, Maeterlinck—are not for us," he

wrote. "They have not reached up through labored fields that are our own. Absorption in them is a natural growth for their countrymen; for the American it is a dangerous trick. And its consequence must be to cleave us from reality as completely as it intensifies reality for the European. We have our own fields to plow; our own reality to explore and flush with vision. Let us do this first, humbly and doggedly as lowly toilers must."

Out of the Washington Square Players grew the Theater Guild, which is today one of our two most interesting theater groups, the other being the Provincetown group in its various forms. Several of the directors and workers of the Washington Square Players, with a few others, opened the Guild at the Garrick Theater in April 1919, with Benavente's *Bonds of Interest*.

OTHER EXPERIMENTS

In these brief accounts of our two leading experimental theaters I have tried only to suggest something of the spirit that moved in our midst during the half-decade before the appearance of *Beyond the Horizon*. In New York and elsewhere there were a score

of other Little Theaters with policies not vastly different. If you care to know more about these, look through the pages of Thomas H. Dickinson's *The Insurgent Theater,* Constance D'Arcy Mackay's *The Little Theater in the United States,* and Oliver Sayler's *Our American Theater.* There you will find a history of hopes, disappointments, misspent energy, and a modicum of intelligent work.

If I were tracing historical parallels I should have to go back to 1906 when Victor Mapes directed the Chicago New Theater, and a study of that would probably take me back to a still earlier period, until I should reveal a series of links connecting every "new" venture of our time with the countless "new" and forgotten ventures of generations ago.

If, as I believe, the Chicago New Theater and the Donald Robertson Players; Craig's Castle Square Theater; Ames' New Theater; The Wisconsin Players; The Toy Theater of Boston; the Philadelphia Plays and Players; the Northampton Theater; Maurice Browne's Chicago Little Theater, and all the rest did their generous share in bringing new writers and directors, new actors and man-

agers into existence, it cannot justly be claimed that the present flourishing state of our drama is altogether due to their efforts. Sam Hume, Maurice Browne, George Cook, Edward Goodman, Donald Robertson, Mrs. Gale and Stuart Walker, were results as well as causes, symptoms as well as stimulants. Several of our best dramatists have had no direct contact with any of these groups, and would resent being classed as products of any movement or policy.

In spite of affectation and a great deal of inconsequential talk, in spite of a wicked waste of time and energy, the hundred experimental theaters that existed between 1900 and 1920 succeeded in doing the most useful work that could have been accomplished at the time. They struggled, flourished, and for the most part went out of existence: after their function had been fulfilled, they disappeared.

Before most of the experimental theaters had either ceased to exist or had become absorbed in more ambitious and less useful organizations, a new generation of dramatists had come into being, men who, while not always identified with them, benefited by having larger and more intelligent audiences

than they could have hoped for in the days when the theater was run solely as a business venture.

Because Winthrop Ames had found a public at the New Theater for *The Piper* and *The Nigger,* because George Cook had been able to sell seats to people willing to see new plays by unknown writers, because everywhere throughout the land there were small publics willing to see new plays no matter how bad they might occasionally be —because in short, a few intelligent men and women had felt the need of fresh air behind the curtains of our theaters, the best of our present-day playwrights find it a little easier to dig deeper below the surface of things than they would have been able to do a quarter of a century ago.

GEORGE KELLY

I can think of no dramatist among those who count who owes less to the experimenters than George Kelly, and if it weren't for his *Torch-Bearers,* a brilliant satire on the Little Theater, I should say that they had had no direct influence on his work. But that gay farce is so biting and direct that I suspect

the author of having had illicit relations at some time with an "arty" theater. Mr. Kelly is altogether at home in the professional theater. Yet he is as independent of managers and as indifferent to the petty intrigues of theatrical people as though he had never seen New York. There is something aloof in his manner that is reassuring; if you try to find him you don't telephone to the Lambs' Club or the Players'; if he happens to be in New York he stops at an out-of-the-way hotel, but he is more likely to be at home in Philadelphia, or abroad. In one sense, the theater doesn't interest him at all—only plays. Considering that he knows the theater as actor, director, and playwright, he is a very slow worker. But there is no cause for haste: every character must be clearly in mind, and every word spoken by him set down exactly where it belongs, before the MS. is released to the Director.

George Kelly was born in a suburb of Philadelphia in 1887. Of his nine brothers and sisters, one—an elder brother, Walter —was well-known in vaudeville. Educated in the public schools of his native city and privately, his theatrical career did not begin until he was twenty-one. He then became an

actor, playing juveniles in New York and in road companies. Then he went into vaudeville, not only acting but writing several sketches. Of these *Finders-Keepers* seems to have been the earliest. I say "seems" because Mr. Kelly is reticent about giving out information on his own plays and biographical data on himself. At any rate, the printed copy carries a notice that *Finders-Keepers* was produced at the Palace Theater, New York, in 1916.

The best of the one-acters were recently published in a volume, *The Flattering Work and Other One-Act Plays.* The "others" are *Smarty's Party, The Weak Spot,* and *Poor Aubrey.*

Finders-Keepers has to do with a woman who finds a large sum of money and intends to keep it, but her husband turns the tables on her in an attempt to give her a lesson in honesty. "I'm afraid," says one of the characters, "very few people are honest, if it costs them four hundred dollars." But the lesson is lost. The young playwright has written here a somewhat mechanical scene, based on several coincidences, in order that his little satire might give him a chance to comment on feminine honesty. His tone is

cold and scornful, without a trace of sympathy, unless it be a youthful and superior sort of godlike sympathy for humanity in the mass. There is something here of the stern morality dear to a certain kind of adolescent, unforgiving and uncompromising. But in spite of his bitterness, Mr. Kelly writes here in the vein of comedy.

Smarty's Party is still more bitter, but technically it is better than *Finders-Keepers*. *Poor Aubrey* is the best of all these vaudeville sketches, and it was this that he later expanded into his best play, *The Show-Off*.

This, his second long play, is written round the figure of Aubrey Piper of West Philadelphia. It is a portrait, carefully drawn, yet broadly, with more than a touch of the grotesque. Aubrey is at once a caricature and an individual, intensely alive, yet overdrawn. There could never have existed an Aubrey Piper; just as there could never have existed a Mr. Pecksniff or a Mrs. Gamp, a Harpagon or a M. Jourdain. The character of Aubrey is a synthesis of all the American bluffs and windbags we ever knew; he moves in his little world with the assurance and self-satisfaction of a Napoleon, and if for a

moment his self-confidence wavers no one knows it but himself.

I imagine that George Kelly set out to draw the picture of an insufferable bore, for there is evidence throughout of the dramatist's scorn, but like Sinclair Lewis with his Babbitt, Mr. Kelly so completely understood his character before he was through with him that, perhaps in spite of himself, he made him an almost likable figure. I am inclined to think that any human being, fully explained and truthfully described, is bound to appeal sympathetically to other human beings. Aren't the villains of history and literature after all only a set of dummies in falseface?

But whatever he intended to do, Mr. Kelly has achieved in *The Show-Off* a masterly comedy of character. Perhaps today it is only a farce; in that case we shall have to wait until the dramatist dies before calling it a comedy. Have we not been told that a comedy is a farce written by a deceased author?

Some of Mr. Kelly's most brilliant gifts were lavished upon *Craig's Wife*, another full-length character portrait. This time the full force of his irony is directed against

a cold and selfish woman. His intention, as in *The Show-Off*, was to show us a human being, but he made a mistake in using the same technical methods in developing Mrs. Craig that he used with Aubrey Piper. Aubrey demanded a coarse and vigorous brush and a few primary colors, while Mrs. Craig calls for the etcher's needle. She is a thoroughly selfish woman, the sort that Strindberg delighted to depict; but Mr. Kelly erred by turning her inside out, telling us at once in his first act nearly everything he knows about her. You know the lady after five minutes, and you can't believe that anyone she had anything to do with could have been deceived into thinking her other than a monster. In life women who under the surface are what Mr. Kelly makes her out to be, are charming and cultivated, agreeable and friendly; they reveal their quintessential selfishness only on the rarest occasions and under the stress of extraordinary circumstances.

The particular crisis chosen for the consummation of Mrs. Craig's desire to rid herself of everything that she dislikes is a murder. Craig is in danger of being dragged into a scandal connected with the affair, and

in trying to evade the publicity his wife weaves an elaborate network of lies. Every step in the development of the plot serves to throw light on the lady's character, but the plot is too obviously introduced for this purpose, and the character analysis is consequently too baldly thrust upon our attention. Mrs. Craig remains at the end little more than a psychological curiosity.

Mr. Kelly told Burns Mantle that he hadn't any method, and Mantle has told it to us in his *American Playwrights of Today*, a book overflowing with the most readable sort of information, a work that will be pilfered from by another generation of theatrical historians. "I don't know where my plots come from. I follow no particular formula. . . . I don't know anything about play construction. . . ." He knows people, and that is the most important thing. He once told me that he had at least two originals in mind for Mrs. Craig. He watched these women, and made mental notes, then his "plot"—or whatever he calls it—took shape gradually. "I just started," as he once said to Frank Lea Short, "with some bit of truth as I saw it being lived around me and allowed it to grow in its own way. The truth

is all that counts. If a thing is true it can be acted and audiences will go to see it. There's the whole proposition in a nutshell."

Craig's Wife; for all the honest work that went into it, is not a very good play, because Mr. Kelly is hardly at his best when he tries to explain his characters, or makes them explain themselves. Worse still, he becomes didactic. And this is doubly fatal, because he has a kind of eloquence while preaching that doesn't ring true.

He is not only a puritan, but unashamedly a moralist. "The theater," he has said, "is . . . a place for the enrichment of the mind and the enlargement of the soul." So it is, but I doubt if any man who so veraciously transcribes everyday life as Mr. Kelly does can have much to tell us about the conduct of life that we don't already know. I also think that any man who presumes to tell his fellowmen what is right and what is wrong must lack that insight into human character without which no writer of plays can hope to become a real dramatist.

Hence I can't take very seriously George Kelly's moralistic pretensions. His two "moral" plays, *Craig's Wife* and *Behold, the Bridegroom*—are his weakest works, while

The Show-Off and *Daisy Mayme*, in which the emphasis is laid principally on character, are his best. *Behold, the Bridegroom*—was produced in 1928. It has to do with the troubles of Antoinette Lyle, a spoiled daughter of the rich, who becomes infatuated with a nice young man who refuses to take any notice of her; she falls into a decline, and realizes that her life has been sinful and devoid of good works. Then she is led off the stage, presumably to die. Not, mind you, of unrequited love, but because she at last sees herself as she really is. But I can't sympathize with Tony. Even though such a girl under these conditions might succumb, I refuse to admit that she would speak Johnsonian prose in doing so. Tony's rhetoric is so contagious that it spreads to the other characters, and scenes that ought to run smoothly are choked with words.

No, the man who wrote *The Show-Off* cannot yet claim Long Island and Park Avenue as his province. I write this in dejection and disappointment, for Mr. Kelly is one of my shining hopes. In a limited sense he is our Molière, and he has only begun his life work; to see him trying to do what Mrs.

Wharton does very nicely in her own limited way, is a sad spectacle.

Daisy Mayme, which was produced before *Behold, the Bridegroom* deserves more than passing notice. For one thing, it proves that Mr. Kelly is not a one-play man, even though it is not so brilliant as *The Show-Off*. Without more than the shred of a story, with no big moments and with scarcely more than a single emotional climax, it is compact with authentic and highly entertaining scenes. A spinster of forty comes into the home of a man about her own age, teaches him how to handle his self-seeking relatives, proves to him that there is a lot of fun to be got out of life, and then marries him. Eight human beings and an old-fashioned parlor are enough for Mr. Kelly; he doesn't bring in a single detective, or call for one revolver; there are no program notes to explain what it's all about, and I don't remember seeing or hearing a telephone.

Here is an unpretentious comedy of life written by a young man who is tired of the footlights and rarely goes to the theater, to whom no trick is new, no hokum that's not wearisome. He fights theatricality with its own weapons; he writes superlatively of

what he knows and sees; he plays with the theater as Strauss plays with the orchestra. At times it seems as though he disdained the old thing, yet he can curb and bend it to his own purposes. His somewhat bitter attitude toward life is occasionally tempered with indulgence, and his comedy at its best arises out of that combination of love and indignation that produced the masterpieces of Molière.

But like Strauss, Mr. Kelly runs the risk of falling a victim to his own virtuosity; his technical facility is dangerous. Though his latest play is not his best, *Maggie the Magnificent* marks a stage in Mr. Kelly's development. It is concerned with a girl who has an instinct, or at least a desire, for better surroundings and more intelligent associates than she can find in her drab commonplace home. Her mother has always taken it out on Maggie, and even now the two don't get along together. Maggie is offered a chance to get into the home of a wealthy family, even though her position there is only that of a superior kind of housekeeper. Having left home and made a beginning as an independent girl, she becomes more or less reconciled with her mother, succeeds in breaking

off the strong attachment between her mother and aunt, and agrees to marry a man who has for a long time been in love with her. But he is of her own class, and presumably Maggie will not rise, socially, in her new world.

What I like about the play is its pointlessness; I mean it is just a play about a few people, and what they do cannot be construed as meaning anything in particular, and in this respect the play may be said to resemble a fruit-piece by Cézanne. It is a still-life; but still though it may be, it is life none the less. Yet like a painter's study of anything inanimate, it is occasionally rather dull. Unfortunately, the acting and direction served to emphasize this defect, and the play closed after about a month's run at the Cort.

Maggie the Magnificent is a work of the head, an intelligent, somewhat too intellectually deliberate play, but it shows that George Kelly is still to be counted on.

ELMER RICE

Though he began to write several years before George Kelly was ever heard of, Elmer Rice is five years his junior. He was born in New York City in 1892, and for the next

twenty-six years he never lived more than two miles away from his birthplace. Except for two or three years in Europe and a season in Hollywood, Mr. Rice has remained a New Yorker, and as such he stands almost alone among the present generation of playwrights who have something to say. His family wanted him to go into business, but it took less than a year, he wrote later, "to demonstrate my ineptitude . . . so I went in for law."

After long study he was admitted to the bar, but he never practised, for the simple reason that he was not interested. For some reason he *was* interested in the idea of writing a play, and a play he wrote. *On Trial* was produced toward the end of August 1914, and made a tremendous hit. I remember at the time hearing people tell that a boy at Columbia had written a play that acted backward! It appeared that "Young Reizenstein" (the name was wisely altered during the war) was an infant prodigy.

Well, the play was novel, for the author had used the "cut-back" device in the unfolding of the story; and there was a fresh note in the writing.

The law-clerk had sold his MS. a couple of days after sending it; Arthur Hopkins bought it and not long after, with Messrs. Cohan and Harris, produced it. Rice tells me he made enough money to live on for several years, which was lucky, because it was nearly fifteen years before he had another hit —which means, of course, a play that makes real money. But *Street Scene* is recent history.

In 1916 I was associated with Rice, Hatcher Hughes and a few others in organizing the Morningside Players, one of the hundred experimental ventures of that day. We gave, I think, two bills; the first was Rice's *Iron Cross*, a very poor war play, and the second a quartet of one-acters, one of which was Rice's *Home of the Free*. We were all enthusiastic for a time, then came the usual financial troubles, and America's participation in the war. In the preface to Frank Shay's edition of the *Morningside Plays* I had written with high hopes that if the Players "adhere to their program, if they continue to welcome new work that is sincere and interesting . . . they cannot but fulfil the task which the commercial theater has failed to accomplish; and their work will be at an end when the commercial manager comes to real-

ize that with intelligence and a little faith he can experiment with his playwright and his public."

But by October of 1917, Rice was writing to me: "the Players have gone the way of sugar, freedom of the press and other obsolete institutions. . . . We cannot hope to compete successfully with the war as a topic of interest. Our last production, with its very modest budget of $1100, netted us a deficit of $400. If I were a patron of the arts, I might regard this balance on the wrong side of the ledger as convincing proof of the virtue of the enterprise. As it is, I don't think the game is worth the candle."

Then for a time Elmer Rice, the promising young author of *On Trial*, disappeared from view. Evidently he had no more popular melodramas up his sleeve. The big public knew and heard nothing more of him.

In 1919 John D. Williams failed to do any business with the conventional *For the Defence*, while another pot-boiler, *It Is the Law*, likewise failed in 1922. But in 1921, joining forces with Hatcher Hughes, he wrote *Wake Up, Jonathan!*, a light tailor-made comedy which served the purpose of giving

Mrs. Fiske a show for some months. It is rather thin.

Seven years had gone by since *On Trial*, and Rice remained just one of a hundred more or less competent playsmiths. He had had his fling as a semi-radical; he had played around with at least one "idealistic" theater group; he had tried his hand at pot-boilers without making much money. Was he, like too many others who began well, to amount to nothing after all? He was not, but no one except Rice himself knew it until the Theater Guild produced *The Adding Machine* in March 1923.

At last here was something new—a new technique, a new viewpoint, a revelation. The playwright had found himself. I don't know —and it makes small difference anyway— how far Rice deliberately adopted the so-called Expressionistic method in writing his play, but it is certain that *The Adding Machine* is of the same brood as Toller's *Masse-Mensch* and Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*. The play came at just the moment when writers were trying to set down on paper and canvas, in music and on the stage, something that they felt must be expressed, something dreadful that happens to most of

us who live in this exciting but terrible city civilization of ours. How does it feel to be a cog in a machine, a unit in a factory that standardizes not only inanimate things but breathing men? *The Adding Machine* takes Mr. Zero, whose unimportance is magnified to heroic proportions, and carries him through the last years of his drab life, finally landing him in heaven; but when he gets there he learns he's got to go back and begin all over again as a baby. He will grow up and be sent to school, where "they'll tell you the truth about a great many things that you don't give a damn about, and they'll tell you lies about all the things you ought to know—and about all the things you want to know they'll tell you nothing at all. When you get through you'll be equipped for your life-work. You'll be ready to take a job."

No, Elmer Rice is not preaching; he is too wise for that; he knows preaching doesn't do any good. He is just telling and showing, and quietly chuckling to himself. The irony isn't very subtle, but that's because in a story contrived for the theater you can't at the same time be very subtle and understood; yet if we grant the theater its medium and admit that the playwright must paint in

broad strokes, then we've got to admit that Rice has done an effective job with remarkable success.

So remarkable that when he came to write again about the underdog who lives in a steel office, he seems to have run short of inspiration. *The Subway* is another play about the same sort of people, only this time a girl is the central figure. Maybe if it had been acted just after it was written six years ago it would not have seemed as faded as when I saw it done by the Lenox Hill Players in the early spring of 1929. Like other plays of its type, it attempts to reproduce and suggest, by means both realistic and fantastic, the sensations of a young girl who is after happiness and love. Sophie Smith, a stenographer of unimaginable simplicity, is hardly more than a symbol of the dramatist's notion of idealistic youth face to face with the bitter facts of a dull hard life. The Subway, symbolizing brutality and the hatefulness of standardized humanity, is the background of her short and tragic sojourn on earth. Except in one short scene, Sophie is a sentimental abstraction, as bloodless as any virgin in a super-film. Pursued by lusting men, clinging to her desire for happiness, she

is ultimately driven to throw herself under the wheels of an onrushing train.

Where Rice pointed the way with his *Adding Machine* others followed: J. P. McEvoy in *God Loves Us* and Francis Faragoh in *Pinwheel*. John Howard Lawson's *Roger Bloomer*—produced about the same time as *The Adding Machine*—was evidently influenced somewhat by the same German originals.

Mr. Rice had meantime gone on trying out new things, doing his best to express what he thought and felt about life. With Dorothy Parker he wrote *Close Harmony*, which was not much of a success in New York, though under the title of *The Lady Next Door* it did fairly well on the road. It is a realistic play about the kind of suburbanites whose ideas and habits have become as uniform as the houses they live in. A man and a woman are attracted to each other; the man's wife and the woman's husband are in each case unsympathetic; a few commonplace conversations and a little music bring Ed Graham and Belle Sheridan together. They decide to go away, but at the last moment the man is held back, by habit, fear, and his standardized conscience.

The authors have dispensed with a story in the usual sense, because they didn't need anything but a few ordinary people and a situation.

To understand the development of Elmer Rice you must think of him as a man who does not belong to the theater; he respects the theater only so far as it gives him a chance to use it. In a very real sense the theater belongs to him.

"My greatest enthusiasm is not for drama," he has often told me, "it is music chiefly. I am interested in painting too, and the other arts. And of course in people."

Here we have also one explanation of his versatility. He hardly ever repeats himself. I have before me now six of his one-act plays in MS. or in old magazines and anthologies; they are not very good plays, but they show a youthful eagerness to treat half a dozen different aspects of life. Here, too, is a pantomime in many scenes, called *The Sidewalks of New York*, a kind of preliminary sketch for *Street Scene*; and *Helen and John*, a four-act play on divorce. This last is an extremely interesting character study. Neither of these plays has yet been sold, but both deserve production. Here also are *See Naples and Die*,

an uproarious comedy, and *Life is Real*, a modern morality play. *See Naples* was produced in October 1929.

See Naples and Die, described by the author as an "extravagant comedy," is a light and deliberately frivolous work by a fundamentally serious writer. Haydn wrote a Toy Symphony and even Beethoven found diversion in turning out funny rondos for little girls and pianists he happened to like. But nearly all the metropolitan critics didn't like to let the author of *The Adding Machine* and *Street Scene* romp; they couldn't allow him to bask in the sun of an Italian café, pleasantly bemused with red ink and the spectacle of the passing scene in a hotel filled with tourists.

See Naples and Die is a comic opera without music. Here we have young Americans and soldiers, revolutionists and spies, a Russian prince and the police—a whole assortment of puppets dancing against a painted drop of the Bay of Naples—by Robert Edmond Jones. The whole extravaganza is as inconsequential and meaningless as a glass of vermouth, a plate of spaghetti, or the sinking sun gilding a blue-tinted wine-shop in Sorrento, and almost as enchanting.

Yet the comedy has its faults: it should have been more brittle, more deliberately fantastic; the writer's viewpoint ought to have been slightly deflected away from the normal, and the acting have been more studiedly artificial. Just what I demand here is hard to put into words: Max Reinhardt's company of 1914, before Reinhardt began imitating himself, could have turned the trick.

But let us at least give Rice credit for his neat and playful farce.

So far his biggest success is *Street Scene*. Unlike some of his earlier efforts, this was not written in order to make money. When he first told me about it he thought it had few chances as a popular hit. With characteristic modesty he said it would doubtless "prove interesting." I imagine Mr. Brady, who produced it, was not over-sanguine.

It was conceived as a painting or a symphonic poem, rather than as a story. It is fundamentally a picture, an exposition, with a subtle sort of musical undertone. Most of the action passes on the steps in front of an apartment building that has seen better days, inhabited by Jews, Irish, Italians, Scandinavians and a few nondescripts who may, for want of a better name, be lumped together

as Americans. We see these people going to business and coming home, loving, fighting, arguing, drinking, lying, backbiting, dreaming and suffering. Out of this turmoil there come to the surface just the outlines of two "stories." Only they aren't really stories; they are hardly more than the incidents out of which a conventional playwright would have made his plots. For instance, a jealous husband pretends he is going away, but unexpectedly returns, discovers his wife and her lover together, and shoots them. And again, a Jewish boy and an Irish Catholic girl are lonely; they are drawn together for a short time, then go their ways alone.

Yet *Street Scene* is neither a melodrama of passion nor a love-story, though there is plenty of material for both. The play is not about any particular person or his affairs, it is a picture and, as I have said, a symphonic poem based on themes found in our New York life. Rice is artist enough not to philosophize or moralize; his part is done after he throws his picture into dramatic relief. There is no beginning and no end: we are taken up to, let us say, 65th Street, are shown a group of men, women and children, and held by the spectacle, because what we see and hear

is essentially true. Here are birth and death, here are the things that happen daily, not craftily arranged in a conventional pattern, but in conformity with what we feel is the truth. There is nothing that seems unimportant, because everything is presented with sincerity and simplicity.

The play slowly builds as each tiny detail is added, and at last it stands whole and perfect. There is not a scene or a line that taken by itself is intrinsically remarkable; there is nothing in itself that seems strikingly original. The play can't be properly judged by its parts, because every part belongs with every other part.

Street Scene is not the highest sort of art, and in saying this I have no intention of belittling the writer's talent. Artistically it belongs in the category of work that is typified by *Main Street* in America and *The Old Wives' Tale* in England. Observation plus something else (that I shan't even try to define) produces the novels of Balzac and Turgenev. Elmer Rice is not yet a Balzac or a Turgenev, but I don't think it impossible that in time he may give to our theater a play that not only shows us some aspects of our life as we live it, but a glimpse of hu-

manity in its universal aspects. To do this he must reach a more advanced stage of maturity.

Like O'Neill and George Kelly and Paul Green, Elmer Rice is one of those who believe that the theater is "too much with us." "I dislike the theater—playgoing, the business end, and all the rest," he tells me, "though I like to write plays." To devote your best energies to the writing of plays does not always mean that you have to love the smell of grease-paint, and to write a good play it is not necessary to drench yourself in the atmosphere of the theater. I am inclined to think that the dramatist's place is the home—at least not on the stage, in the green-room or in the manager's office.

SIDNEY HOWARD

Another young playwright who may also be described as wholesomely contemptuous of the theater, is Sidney Howard. Perhaps that's putting it too strong; shall I say, a man who hates the routine of getting a play put on the stage? He is impatient with the long delay from the moment he gets his work written to its realization—so far as it is

realization—before the footlights. But the theater needs the kind of devotion he has to give it, and I hope his gifts in other directions don't lead him afield.

"I grew up," he says, "in a mess of books; my father was a self-educated man. I inherited two of his three enthusiasms. I inherited books and gardening. His third and greatest, science, skipped me except that I have a kind of curiosity about people rather than rocks and plants. I began writing poetry pretty early in life. I think I have always fumbled around for some kind of artistic expression. I liked music better than anything and always raged because I wasn't able to get ahead in it. I gave it up like a fool."

(At this point I'd better explain that these remarks were made in a letter, while the quotations to come are made up from the memory of many conversations during the past ten years. Like George Kelly, Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, Paul Green, O'Neill, and a few others, Howard doesn't like to give out personal material on himself for publication. It's been necessary to use a kind of blackmail with these men, telling them that if I don't write about their lives, someone

else may, and perhaps the facts will then be more accurately stated.) To continue:

Howard grew up in California. He was born in Oakland in 1891, went to school without much enthusiasm and graduated from the University of California in 1915. After a year in Switzerland he returned to America and enrolled in Professor Baker's English 47 class at Cambridge. Not long after, he went to Greece and became an ambulance driver at Saloniki. Later he joined the American Aviation Corps, and saw active service in a bombing squadron.

After the war—uncertainty, so far as the theater was concerned; reporting (his *Labor Spy* articles in The New Republic are among the best of their kind); getting acquainted with people and things in New York; working on *Life*—I mean the weekly.

Though he had already written some verse and composed a mission play for use in California, Howard was not the usual struggling young literary man.

The first I heard of any intention on his part to write plays was in one of those abrupt remarks he's in the habit of making. They boom into the midst of a conversation apropos of nothing at all. We were lunching at

Browne's Chop House—now only a memory of theatrical photographs, thick mutton-chops and pewter mugs of ale—— It was late 1918 or early 1919. We had been trying to stir up interest in the *Jurgen* case, and both of us were Cabell boosters.

"Is there a play," he said—he didn't ask it—"in *The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck*?" —I wasn't sure. Why the question? Next day I thought it over, and told him at lunch that I believed a good play *could* be made out of the novel.—"Why did you ask?"

"Let's do it," he said, and we did. Cabell was amused and courteous and interested, even though we managed to squeeze most of his dialogue out of our script. In time we sold the play, and waited. Nothing happened, until after Howard had come into his own.

The Rivet wasn't my play—it was two-thirds Sidney's. The energy of the man was amazing. I couldn't keep up with him.

Play then followed play, but his scripts were destroyed. No good. False.

Meantime the man was growing. People —only people—mattered. Plays are dramatized people—they're not plots that you piece together. "Writing a play," as he says, "is

just getting excited enough about a character to fasten him down on paper."

Yet his own first play seen in New York was a pastiche. *Swords,* written for Clare Eames and produced in 1921 by Brock Pemberton, was a poetic drama of the Italian Renaissance, written under the influence of *The Jest.* The play was not quite alive, though it had color and some first-rate dialogue. *Swords* came from Howard's reading, I feel, his desire to see Miss Eames in a romantic role, and his love of the glamor of Italy. But this was only an incident in his development: he was soon to learn that his material lay closer to hand.

For see what he says of his family and background: "On both sides we were pioneer stock. My mother's family came across the continent before '49. My father opened the first steamship line to Alaska. My grandfather opened Oregon and Washington by putting the first boats on the Columbia River."

The influences at work were considerable. As a youth there were memories of people and mountains. But clearly there was no connection in his mind between the scenes of his youth and the New York theater as

he later came to know it. As to our theater of the past, he knew little or nothing.

"I came," he says, "very much under the influence of Sam Hume and his first new stagecraft show. But I chucked the idea of the theater to go over to drive an ambulance."

Again, Sam's influence!

"In time Vildrac's *Tenacity* started me into an alley where I could function somehow for the theater, and there I've been ever since. Always about to tumble out into a world I like better than the theater, and always picked up and put back."

Sidney Howard was first recognized as a real dramatist when late in 1924 the Theater Guild produced *They Knew What They Wanted*. This was what Howard had spoken of shortly before as "an unpretentious little comedy about some California people I knew and liked, with just the glimmer of an idea behind it."

The story tells of a Southern California vine-grower and bootlegger, an Italian named Tony, who has proposed by mail to a pretty American waitress he once saw in a San Francisco restaurant. Amy arrives under the impression that the much younger Joe, an I.

W. W. working for the Italian, is her husband-to-be, for Joe has written Tony's letters, and Tony has sent Joe's photograph instead of his own, fearing that his middle-aged countenance might dampen the girl's ardor. Tony, on a stretcher, appears on the scene to welcome his bride: he has just been severely injured in an automobile accident. The girl's first impulse is to return to her job: she has been deceived, she cares nothing for this elderly Italian, and she has already taken a liking to Joe. But on second thought she decides to stay; she wants rest and a home and kindness, all of which Tony is ready to give her.

But on the night of her wedding, with Tony lying helpless on his couch she succumbs, for the first time in her life, to a variety of strange impulses, and gives herself to Joe. Tony suspects nothing until three months later, when Amy learns she is going to have a baby. She and Joe decide to go away, but Amy wants first to tell her husband the truth. Tony's first reaction is like that of a character in grand opera (don't we all react impulsively according to what we have seen on the stage or read in stories?); then, like Amy, he reflects a moment: he

loves his wife and wants a child. Why not have them both? Besides, his accident has made it impossible that he should ever have children of his own.

Howard would be the last man to write a play of ideas, a play written to develop or exploit a theory of conduct or thought, but having ideas about people he has no objection to letting these filter through. He makes as it were a little comment on his people, but never forces them to illustrate the basic idea.

They Knew What They Wanted might be called a comedy of second thoughts: in the first act Amy starts to do the conventional thing because her pride is wounded, but on second thought she knows she wants comfort and affection more than she does revenge; in the third act Tony starts to do the same thing, because somewhere within him is a conviction that a good husband must kill his wife's lover, but on second thought he takes a wiser course.

The best of this play is not the dramatic scenes; these are only the framework. The conversations, especially between Joe and Tony, are so essentially true, so unaffected and riotously human, that you resent a little

the dramatist's doubtless necessary technical devices.

The success of *They Knew What They Wanted* must have encouraged Mr. Howard —not because it made money, but that it proved that audiences were ready to watch in a play human beings who were not altogether black nor white, good nor bad. In other words, he learned that it wasn't necessary to resort to the novelist's methods in order to show men and women with mixed motives.

Lucky Sam McCarver was a failure. Do I have to explain that I don't mean the play was poor? Not that it was perfect; more ambitious than *They Knew What They Wanted*, it is marred by the author's attempt to carry through two stories, to develop two chief characters, instead of one. None the less the play marks an advance in the development of this dramatist. The long preface to the printed work is a delightful thing—a portrait of Howard, shrewd, impetuous, wise; full of wisdom and the most amiable kind of exaggeration. Read these lines and ponder them: "I determined . . . to stick as closely as I was able to 'the value and significance of flesh'—in other words, to ask of the life

I was reporting no more concessions than my limited skill as a reporter forced me to ask. I was resolved, for example, that my characters should, throughout the play, do and say what they would, as people have done and said, rather than what the dramatic situation might seem to require of them. I did not, furthermore, make any attempt at a theatrical simplification of the motives of my characters. No one, in life, ever does anything altogether for any single reason; I cannot see why people in plays should be as single-minded as audiences like to have them. In good plays they never are."

Referring more specifically to Sam McCarver, he writes: "I refused to allow their deep love [Sam's and his wife's] for one another to help them in the slightest degree, because, whatever dramatists and novelists may write to mislead young people into romance, love remains the only thing which fails humanity more treacherously than religion does."

Of course no playwright's work should be judged by what he says of it, but I ask you to turn from Mr. Howard's preface to the half-dozen prefaces affixed to the published plays of Augustus Thomas a few years

ago. The viewpoint expressed by our "Dean of the American Drama" in his preface to *In Mizzoura* is crystallized by one sentence: "There must be love interest, of course."

Lucky Sam McCarver is far finer as a portrait than a dramatic entertainment, but so far as Howard has succeeded in setting down unsentimentally the truth as he sees it, he has created a work of merit. On the other hand I am inclined to think that, given what he tried to do, it would have been a poorer thing if it had turned out a better theater piece.

It is described as "Four Episodes in the Rise of a New Yorker." McCarver is first seen as proprietor and manager of the Tuileries Night Club. He marries a woman with "class," enters a sphere of society above his own, and then becomes disgusted with it. In marrying Carlotta Ashe he makes a compact which ministers to his pride, and when his wife resents this he is surprised and hurt; but she has her own life to live, and goes away to associate with people who interest her. At the last she dies and Sam, presumably, rises to still greater "heights." There is a good deal more than this to the play, much that's intrinsically arresting and worth-

while, in particular a number of scenes where Sam and Carlotta thrash out their domestic differences. To tell the story in detail would be one way of showing my chief objection to it.

It is plain that Howard set out to draw a full-length portrait of McCarver, but during the process he was led astray on the one hand into certain plot episodes, and betrayed on the other (probably by his desire to draw another clean-cut portrait) into over-elaborating the character of Carlotta. The outlines of Sam's picture have become obscured in order that other matters might be treated that have little to do with him. In plays of this kind the dramatist must put his characters into some sort of critical situation, or two or three closely related situations, but these are made significant only at the risk of overshadowing the characters. For example, the first act here rises to an exciting climax; a man is murdered just off-stage, and Sam takes on himself the responsibility for the deed, claiming self-defense. The curtain falls on the examination of Sam and his associates by the police, and the audience is left wondering how it will all turn out. At this point we are no longer interested in

Sam's character, but in his predicament: Sam is just a person in a mess. In the second act it becomes evident—after the lapse of some time—that the murder has been introduced by the dramatist largely in order to show Sam's coolness and bravado. Murder has been introduced into the plot for an insufficient reason. And in the last act Carlotta dies. Now it is all very well to show Marguerite Gautier dying in the last act of *Camille*: that has been prepared for, not only by skilful planting, but because the facts of the case, as described, required that she should die. In *Lucky Sam McCarver* (even though Carlotta's weak heart *is* mentioned) the lady dies for two reasons, neither of which satisfies me; first, that Sam's rise to greater heights may be indicated, and second, that Carlotta's death may offer a chance for an effective bit of stage business.

Yet, all in all, *Lucky Sam McCarver* is an honest play, a spirited work, and a contribution to our increasing store of contemporary stage portraits.

If there are degrees of honesty, I'd say that *Ned McCobb's Daughter* is a still honester work, but possibly for that reason, not quite so absorbing. Here Mr. Howard casts

into dramatic form something of his enthusiasm for a certain type of Maine Yankee. He spent a few summers in a Maine Coast village, and managed to get excited enough to write a play about a Yankee woman. "Some things," he wrote in 1926, "stand out . . . which Mr. Mencken's manners and Mrs. Wharton's tall hat have omitted from Post-Howells Yankee literature," and it is these that cast their glamor over Ned McCobb's daughter, a real person on the one hand and on the other a grim yet not unpleasant heroine. Carrie is the sort of woman Mary E. Wilkins would have put into a drama if playwriting had been a possible thing for a serious artist when she was at the height of her power.

Ned McCobb's Daughter ran alternate weeks as a Theater Guild production with Mr. Howard's other play, *The Silver Cord*. This last is a solider and finer work, a drama of remarkable effectiveness, concerned with one aspect of the so-called Œdipus Complex. We have here to do with a varicty of motives underlying the acts of Mrs. Phelps, who is bent on keeping her sons from falling into the clutches of what appear to her as designing women. She succeeds in driving off the

fiancée of one of them, and nearly disrupts the marriage of the other.

In spite of the intellectual character of a good deal of the dialogue (the playwright is a brilliant dialectician), *The Silver Cord* remains, even to the person who understands little or nothing of the psychological or pathological basis of Mrs. Phelps' malady, an absorbingly interesting play. It is written with enthusiasm and gusto; Mr. Howard has been especially successful in throwing over his canvas what he once described as the "glamor of reality."

Sidney Howard is no experimenter in form; as a matter of fact, he is a conservative in most technical matters, and it is the more remarkable that having no esthetic chip on his shoulder he is still able to project so much of the life about him into the conventional forms at hand. His commonsense has taught him that the form that comes easiest and most naturally to any artist is the best for him, and that technique ought never to be more than a way of doing something, the something being what really matters. Mr. Howard is concerned with the doing, and not the manner of it.

Half-Gods is his latest play. It is about to

appear as these lines are written. I'm afraid it is too honest and forthright to draw $12,000 a week.

STALLINGS AND ANDERSON

Earlier in the same season that saw the first production of *They Knew What They Wanted* an unheralded play with a strange title made its appearance on Broadway. This was *What Price Glory?*, written by two newspapermen, Lawrence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson. Mr. Stallings, I believe, had not written any play before, and Mr. Anderson had only one to his credit: *White Desert*, first seen in 1923.

The fact that *What Price Glory?* was written at all is worthy of note. War material was dead, we were told at the time; war stories and war plays no longer attracted the public. Having had "adventurous and tragic experiences in the war," says Mr. Mantle, "and having acquired a complete disgust of the shallow and trumpery war play of commerce, Stallings was eager to write from out his own experiences and reactions . . . a real war drama. He confessed the desire to Anderson. They consulted together concern-

ing such a play, its development and dramatic treatment, and finding themselves in accord, they finished the play together."

It was immensely successful, proving once more that fashions, in plays at least, are not set by arbitrary decree. *What Price Glory?* was an honest, closely-observed bit of reporting, a realistic and glamorous show about a few American Marines in France. For the first time in any play we were shown the doughboy as he really was—rough-mannered, loose-tongued, cynical, and gullible—not in the least as he had been portrayed by sentimental writers of musical comedies.

But this was not the real reason for the play's success; that lay in the genuineness of the characters simply as men. Though it was a novelty to see American soldiers in camp as many of them actually were, the scene might have been laid almost anywhere. Two pig-headed hard-boiled men engaged in a desperate struggle make the situation, and the war supplied a picturesque background.

What Price Glory? was followed by two other plays from the Stallings-Anderson workshop: *First Flight* (of the Andrew Jackson era) and *The Buccaneer* (about Morgan the pirate). Neither was a success,

and both were more or less literary, lacking in the vital qualities that made the war play live.

Mr. Stallings has gone to Hollywood, and up to the time these lines are written there is no further news of his activities as a playwright, but Mr. Anderson has pursued his own way, first with his dramatization of Tully's *Beggars of Life*, under the title *Outside Looking In*, and later with *Saturday's Children*, *Gods of the Lightning* (in collaboration with Harold Dickerson) and *Gypsy*. The tramp play is good in some of its incidental scenes, but lacking in form; *Saturday's Children* a wise and charming little comedy; *Gods of the Lightning* a too highly partisan exposition of the Sacco-Vanzetti case; and *Gypsy* a highly interesting if faulty play of character. Though Maxwell Anderson has done nothing alone as completely realized as *What Price Glory?*, he is an artist to be reckoned with.

Let us see where he comes from. Like most of the men I am writing about, he seems a little resentful toward anyone who wants to write him up. I wanted to talk with him, but decided not to attempt an interview, though he courteously offered to see me.

When Burns Mantle asked him for autobiographical data he wrote back, "When a man starts peddling personal stuff about himself, they should send a squad of strong-arm worms after him, because he's dead."

Characteristic, this sentence, and I respect the man's modesty. However, Mantle's coaxing did bring something worth putting down: son of a Baptist minister; born in Atlantic, Pennsylvania; 41 years old; went to school in his native state, in Ohio, Iowa, and North Dakota; attended the University of North Dakota, from which he graduated in 1911; taught in schools and colleges; engaged in newspaper work in San Francisco, and later in New York.

Despite the popularity of *Saturday's Children*—and I can't help thinking Mr. Anderson wrote that play with one eye on the box-office—this man is not a professional play tinker. If he were, he would not have written *Gods of the Lightning* and *Gypsy*. *Gypsy*, for instance, is one of those patch-work plays that is far more satisfying than the neatly arranged *Saturday's Children*. Here is a play you may take apart, examine, weigh and analyze. You will find nearly every scene well-wrought, true in detail

and arresting for the light it throws on one or other of the characters. Mr. Anderson has done something more than observe and depict his young artists and their friends in what used to be known as the Bohemian world of New York: he has used his powers of observation to the end that his play might reach what Galsworthy calls a spire of meaning. *Gypsy* is a portrait play, and the character of the girl ought to stand completely revealed at the fall of the last curtain. But it doesn't. The playwright has given us most of his notes and sketches for the picture, but not the thing itself; for Gypsy is not quite credible. Her husband is, and her lover, her mother and her friends—it is through them that we are forced to depend for something in her that we should otherwise only half apprehend.

The story tells how Gypsy falls in love and then, against her wishes and in spite of her sense of the rightness of fidelity, falls out of love and then in love again—with another man. Most of this is so naturally shown that we are never even tempted to blame her. We feel that this sort of thing does happen—casually, fatally, and that's all there is to it. For Mr. Anderson understands

her so well that we find ourselves saying "There but for the grace of God!" Yet the girl does what a long line of naughty heroines have done ever since the first dramatist had the bright idea of using a fallen woman to draw tears from the eyes of playgoers. The formula called for repentance, whether such women actually repented in life or not. If they didn't repent they would be immoral, and to show an immoral character in a play without bringing her to a sad or tragic end has always been looked upon as immoral.

Mr. Anderson's Gypsy, then, differs from her fictional sisters; she isn't a bit like Camille or Sapho. He understands the girl, even if he hasn't quite expressed her. He knows that her trouble is not moral, but pathological and psychological. She is like a charming and estimable woman I know who once said she could be faithful to five men at the same time. And she could.

The dramatist was for some reason betrayed into writing a false ending. He killed the girl off when he should have done everything to prevent her committing suicide as she did—with the assistance of the gas company. The poor child would certainly not have taken her own life in a moment of

depression, though she might have toyed with the stove: the moment the 'phone bell rang and the new boy-friend asked for a date I am sure she would have said no, and then gone out to meet him.

But even with the right ending, the play would have missed the mark. I think that Gypsy herself should have been presented to us either as a simpler or a more complex person; in a play, perhaps simpler, for detailed analysis is best left in the hands of the novelists.

At any rate, *Gypsy* remains an honest and occasionally a brilliant character-study.

"I think," Mr. Anderson once said, "it takes a genius to write a play worth remembering, and that no such genius happens to exist in this country." Perhaps not—though I'd be willing to argue the point—but Maxwell Anderson, genius or no genius, is to be counted on.

CONNELLY AND KAUFMAN

Speaking of collaborations—and disappointments—I have a few words to say about Messrs. Connelly and Kaufman. George S. Kaufman is a comparatively young man who

left Pittsburgh, where he was born, and came East just before he was twenty. For a while he had a newspaper job in Washington, then another in New York; at last he joined the dramatic news staff of the *Times*, where he still has a desk. Though he has written at least one play by himself, he is at his best when working with somebody else.

His first success was *Dulcy*, which he wrote with Marc Connelly, with "a bow to F.P.A." Mr. Connelly was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, in 1891, and like Mr. Kaufman also worked on a newspaper, until he came to New York in 1915 to see the production of a musical show he had written some lyrics for. The show failed, and since he decided that remaining in the Big City would be easier than going home (he had no money), he stayed.

It must have been some time in 1920 that Kaufman and Connelly met and wrote *Dulcy*. That pleasant comedy was first produced in 1921. *To the Ladies* followed a few months later, and *Merton of the Movies* in November 1922. All these are "mere" entertainment, pleasant enough if you are not over-particular about your amusement.

But nothing we have had from either part-

ner, singly or conjointly, can compare with *Beggar on Horseback*, which Winthrop Ames put on in 1924. In this case the young men collaborated with Paul Apel, whose *Hans Sonnenstoesser's Hohlenfahrt*, furnished the idea. Alexander Woollcott writes in the preface to the printed play:

"It was Winthrop Ames who bought Apel's idea and when he turned his two young neighbors loose on that idea, all they obtained from the German original was such a notion of its general scheme as Ames might have imparted to them in a ten-minute conversation across the managerial desk. Since the same bad dream acted out against an American scene was what was wanted, since a complete naturalization of the German play was the thing sought, this was, I think, the way to go about it."

Beggar on Horseback is a fantasy showing how a young composer of talent is tempted to marry a wealthy girl he doesn't love, and throw over a poor girl he does. The play proper is given over to the nightmare, where all the dreadful things happen that might happen to a sensitive boy thrown into intimate touch with vulgar and stupid relations.

During the dream the boy becomes more and more deeply involved in a perfectly mad network of complications. He is forced to justify his gifts as a composer, to work in his father-in-law's office, and at last—found guilty of writing stuff that doesn't pay—he is condemned to live in a cage and write cheap songs, until in desperation he tries the lock—and finds it open.

The dream fades, and we are back again in the realm of reality. It is in the few breathless scenes where the composer tries to be a business man, in the courtroom where he is tried, and in the last dream episode of the cage that the dramatists prove themselves masters of an indescribably deft and light sort of satire, perfectly balanced, a mixture of sheer fun and incisive criticism. Among our contemporaries only Philip Barry can do this sort of thing as well.

Several of the younger and more earnest dramatists have tried it—Faragoh and Lawson, in particular—but they haven't been able to steer a straight course between the extremes of pure fun and sociology.

Never again did Kaufman or Connelly do anything comparable to *Beggar on Horse-*

back. Mr. Kaufman raised our hopes in the second act of *The Butter-and-Egg Man* (which he wrote alone) and Mr. Connelly tried his best in *The Wisdom Tooth* to write a charming comedy, but he scarcely achieved more than wistfulness of a rather self-conscious variety.

I wonder, will these two men join hands again, will they respect the theater a little more than they have respected it, and give us another fantasy? Can either of them do it alone?

FANTASTIC COMEDY

In the realm of fantastic comedy we have done pretty well. No one who saw Eleanor Gates' *Poor Little Rich Girl* some fifteen years ago, can have failed to see in it a captivating quality of fancy. Miss Gates' play was a sort of Lewis Carroll legend, a dramatization of sense in terms of nonsense. Tom Cushing, only three seasons past, tried to do the same kind of thing in *The Devil in the Cheese*, which somehow didn't quite succeed, except in two or three little incidental scenes. Not until S. N. Behrman's *Serena Blandish*, in the spring of 1929, did an

American playwright show any exceptional talent at exhibiting dramatic fantasies.

Except for Philip Barry.

PHILIP BARRY

He comes from Rochester where, according to "Who's Who's," he was born in 1896. The big red book says little, and Mr. Barry little more, so that I have to rely on a paragraph or two in an out-of-the-way article, and a few short replies to innocent-sounding personal queries. He went to private and public schools in his native city, he tells me, and adds: "I was only bright in spots, and was expelled once for being a general nuisance." He wrote his first story, a highly derivative piece about "a big bear and why the little bear has no tail, at the age of nine. It was published in the *Junior Post Express* of Rochester. This went to my head and I wrote constantly thereafter."

In 1918 he worked as a clerk in the Department of State at Washington, and a few weeks later was sent to London with the staff of the American Embassy. There he stayed until February of the following year, finding his job "very dull indeed." He at-

tended Harvard, 1919-22, where he was a student of Professor Baker's. His first play, however, was a one-acter that was put on by the Yale Dramatic Club in 1919.

It was at Harvard that he wrote his first long play, called in one version (there are two) *A Punch for Judy*. I have read this fantastic comedy, and even seen a good amateur performance of it. The premise is rather too fantastic for such a farce as Mr. Barry meant it to be, and the grotesque second act didn't properly belong with the first and third, but in these, especially the third, there are lines that no one but Barry could have written.

His first really finished play was *You and I*, which won local fame at first as a Harvard Prize Play, and then, in 1923, had a moderate success on Broadway. This is a well-bred comedy about a business man who thought he could paint if he were only given the chance; with the help of his family he is enabled to devote all his energies to his art, only to discover that he has no talent.

This play was followed by *The Youngest*, another well-bred comedy, somewhat less original than *You and I*. It has to do with the always popular turning worm, in this

case an attractive youngster. Up to this time, (1924) Mr. Barry was quite rightly regarded as a clever young man who could be counted on to turn out paying comedies about nice people who say smart things.

Then came *In a Garden*, and even the pessimists could see that Barry wasn't just another playwright. This work is about a dramatist who gives up writing in order to live, to make, as he tells his wife, a "high comedy" of his life. But in striving to do this, the young man goes about it as though he were working out another play; in his eyes his life and his wife's are copy, something to be analyzed and dissected. This artist, it seems, cannot let life run on undisturbed; he is impelled by some demonic instinct to reshape it, improve upon it, even distort it. He must needs always be poking it to see what it is. But his wife, who understands little of his viewpoint and cares less, comes to detest the man's everlasting marivaudage. The two have been moderately happy up to the time when the man makes his momentous decision, but in the end she leaves him. In order to demonstrate in terms of drama the man's inability to accept life as he finds it, Mr. Barry has him reconstruct in his library the garden where

years before his wife and an acquaintance had met and kissed. Instead of letting the matter rest, once he knows the truth, he sets to work analyzing the situation and characters with all the sinister glee of an artist playing with human beings. He tries in fact to re-create with scenery and flesh-and-blood characters a situation that has died in peace, but with all his boasted knowledge of psychology, he succeeds only in arousing his wife's interest instead of purging her, as he has hoped to do, of any morbid curiosity that may have remained. The joke is on him, for his wife had never taken the matter at all seriously. Then she leaves, quietly and without recrimination.

A subtle idea, scarcely material for a play, you might think, yet Mr. Barry has managed to dramatize subtlety itself. He has written a play about the workings of an artist's mind, a suave and delicately ironic comedy.

In a Garden ran only a few weeks, but Mr. Barry had set a difficult standard for himself by writing the most sophisticated high comedy that ever came from a native-born American.

After the play closed, he went to Cannes, to write another. Just before he left he

hinted that he was through with the *You and I* sort of thing, and that his next play would probably ruin the man who produced it. It was to be a fantastic thing about street cleaners.

Late in the fall of 1926 Winthrop Ames brought out *White Wings*, in my opinion the best play he ever sponsored, and after three weeks allowed it to close. *White Wings* is as dainty and poetic, as subtle and charming, as any play of its kind I know.

I find it hard to describe. Can I give you some sort of impression? Well, it is all about the Inch family, who are a dynasty of white-wings (otherwise known as street cleaners), curiously presented as through a refracting-glass and looking to us as they appear to themselves. To them street-cleaning, in its humblest and least sanitary branches, is the finest profession in the world, and horses (without which there is of course no work for white wings) the noblest of all animals. By the year 1895 the Inches have reached the apex of perfection in the development of their art. Suddenly, with only a single note of warning, comes the first horseless carriage, an absurd and almost obscene contraption, a perverse instrument of destruction. Some

years pass, and the automobile threatens the old order of civilization; the horse has begun to be looked upon as antediluvian; but the Inches fight with desperate courage against the modern idea. It is not so much that their profession is threatened, as that their age-honored art is scorned by a new generation.

How whimsically, with what subtle art and half-tones of suggestion this comedy romps along! There is an undercurrent of tragedy expressed in terms of glorious nonsense; there is a curious intermixture of suave humor and cutting satire; there is pure romance and there is unalloyed silliness; but try if you can to disentangle these things and trace any one theme or idea or mood throughout the play. It can't be done.

I don't know why Mr. Ames let the play die, for die it did so far as the first production was concerned. Whoever has the intelligence to revive it with a good cast will show Mr. Ames how wrong he was.

Though the producer was not ruined, he made no money. Neither did the author. And once more he sailed for France, after telling me he was again going to write a play to please himself, even if it ruined the producer.

He was going to do a drama about John the Baptist. He had his nerve, was all I thought at the moment.

John was produced by Guthrie McClintic late in the fall of 1927, with a cast headed by Jacob Ben-Ami and Constance Collier, a Yiddish actor of considerable power but without the gift of speaking English that can be understood, and an English actress who was over-conscious of her stellar attractions.

John ran hardly two weeks. What was wrong? Chiefly the acting, but to a certain extent the direction, for I don't think Mr. McClintic quite understood how John ought to look and behave on the stage. Also, the work is neither obvious nor pious enough to appeal to any large part of the theater-going public. But it is a noble work, written in a language that is poetic and speakable—a combination of the King James Bible and *White Wings*—without being rhetorical. It sounds very much as I imagine the words of John and his followers must have sounded to their contemporaries. The story tells how John the Baptist is superseded by his young pupil Jesus, with his strange new doctrines of peace and forgiveness. John is at first in-

credulous and disappointed, until it is gradually borne in upon him that his mission is over, since Jesus is the Messiah he has preached about and longed for. The plot has to do with the political ambitions and intrigues of Herodias, who captures John in the hope of persuading him to lead her army. But the Prophet, fortified in mind and spirit during his captivity by news of Jesus' success, persists in sticking to his principles and damning Herodias and her husband. The dramatist has portrayed with understanding and art the natural and human disappointment of John as an artist—specifically an orator—and the man's ardor as a prophet. There is a certain similarity here between John and the Emperor Maximilian in Werfel's *Juarez and Maximilian*, particularly in the scenes where John learns from others about the doctrines that Jesus is preaching. In a way John too is fighting a losing battle, but what of that? So did Maximilian, and so did Don Quixote, Antigone, and Hamlet. Victory, the victory of man over himself and the world, can only be achieved, if at all, through defeat.

As Conrad's tragic hero in *Victory* can triumph only by facing and suffering death,

so Mr. Barry's John, only by realizing that his earthly end is at hand, knows that his prophecies have been fulfilled:

> John. Am I to be put to death?
> Prison Official. Those are my orders.
> John. And now?
> Prison Official. At once.
> (John looks to Hanan, who cannot meet his eyes. John's head drops for a moment upon his breast. Then he raises it, a firm, great certainty upon his face.)
> John. Then I am sure.

The play itself has serious defects: long stretches that should be cut, and moments of indecision and uncertainty that make it seem as though the playwright were not sure of his way.

Here is another play that should be done again. If the Theater Guild, for instance, should ever undertake to revive contemporary plays, I call *John* to their attention; and while I'm at it, I'll add *White Wings, In a Garden, The Scarecrow, Lucky Sam McCarver,* and *The Fountain.*

If after three such plays as *In a Garden, White Wings* and *John,* Mr. Barry had deliberately set out to write a paying show, it would be hard to blame him. And this is just what he did—he and Elmer Rice, who

was also in Europe at the same time. *Cock Robin* was the result of their collaboration, a conventional mystery play that made a little money but only a moderate stir in the theater.

But about the same time Mr. Barry won his first really big financial success, with *Paris-Bound*. What George Kelly tried to do in *Behold, the Bridegroom*—, Mr. Barry has admirably accomplished. If Mr. Barry has not played around with the smart people he writes so suavely about, he is an even more finished artist than I give him credit for being. *Paris-Bound* deals with sophisticated wealthy people; these young men and women, dowagers and middle-aged men-about-town don't need to speak in well-rounded sentences and be rude to servants; like the genuine nobility of Europe, they play their roles without self-consciousness. Did you ever know a real Prince? I did, and it wasn't till six months after I saw the last of him that I learned he wasn't, like myself, a poverty-stricken free-lance journalist. He never tapped his cigaret on a silver case; indeed he had no case at all. So it is with Mr. Barry's people in *Paris-Bound*. So far as he goes in the delineation of character,

he carries us with him, but this time his chief interest is not character.

Paris-Bound is really a problem play, though it's not a bit like such wheezy old-timers as Pinero's *Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*. It is woven of far finer texture. Instead of being a sermon in support of morality as a personal matter, it is a plea on behalf of marriage as a contract. Crudely stated, the idea is this: it would be better for everyone concerned to lay less stress on the little matter of sexual infidelity than we do, because the sex-act in itself is less serious than most other varieties of cheating. An "affair" on the part of husband or wife, if it is not fundamentally a *grande passion*, should be condoned and forgotten by the "injured" party. The dramatist shows us an attractive and sensible young couple on their wedding day vowing that jealousy shall not wreck their marriage; but six years later the wife discovers that her otherwise irreproachable husband has twice stepped off the straight and narrow, and decides to divorce him. But just in time she is persuaded not to do so, for three reasons: (1) the arguments of her father-in-law; (2) the realization that she too is capable of breaking her vows in an agreeable way; and

(3) the ardor with which her husband returns to her and the children.

Mr. Barry's thesis is quite reasonable; theoretically it is perfect. If it were acted on we should have to change our notions of sex morality, which wouldn't be a bad idea—but here we find ourselves thinking about marriage in the abstract, and that is what I object to when I go to the theater. Fortunately, Mr. Barry doesn't take us too far afield, for his people are interesting most of the time just as people. But because he "fixed" his play to a certain extent in order to argue about a theory, he couldn't be altogether convincing. If he had been wholly absorbed by his sociological contention, *Paris-Bound* would have been a bit of dead wood, for what does he set out to prove? That since human beings are human beings, it is wrong for them to ruin the institution of marriage and involve innocent children in that wreck just because a husband or a wife has his pride hurt. Mary Hutton doesn't forgive Jack simply because she believes what her father-in-law tells her, but because she herself comes near enough committing adultery to see how easy it is to become infatuated with another man while remaining

technically faithful to her husband. Besides, she is attracted once again to her Jack, whose timely arrival prevents her starting divorce proceedings.

Now, did Mr. Barry care more for his thesis than he did for his comedy as a human document? This would be only an academic question if the play were entirely convincing, but it isn't. Just as a comedy of manners there is far too much discussion, and as a plea for a new standard of sex morals it is based on a situation that is not quite typical. In other words, Jack and Helen are too human, and Mr. Barry has fallen between two stools.

Holiday, produced a few months later, is clear enough as a piece of writing, but like *Paris-Bound*, it also is something of a thesis-play. The basic idea is far too neatly worked out: it lacks spontaneity, except in some of the lines, which are delightful in themselves. But only in two or three scenes is the play convincing and sincere.

Johnny Case has become engaged to Julia Seaton, daughter of a wealthy New Yorker, but before marrying her he asserts that he has no intention of working hard and becoming a millionaire: he wants to enjoy life

while he is young. As Julia begins to realize that he means what he says she grows cool, while her sister Linda falls in love with him and at the very last rather more than hints that she will marry him herself.

As in *You and I, In a Garden, White Wings* and *John*, the writer offers us a situation where one character has enough idealism and will-power to wage war with the forces of materialism. In this latest play, however, the idealist hasn't much to fight for; at best it is a negative sort of happiness, and what he wins is an easy kind of success.

The idea underlying *Holiday* is rather trite; but while it is stated with charm and good humor and a certain commendable skill, it dominates the people, who are nicely ticketed by the writer, instead of being left to work out their own destinies.

What I most regret is that the best of the Barry talents—humor, wit, a captivating fancy and some genuine imagination—are scarcely called for in a play like *Holiday*. If it had been written by anyone else, it would have seemed better.

By the time these words are printed, a new Barry play will have been seen on Broadway. He has said very little about it; only

that I will probably like it, and that it's not so deliberately arranged as *Paris-Bound* and *Holiday*. Maybe he is planning to "ruin" another manager? I hope so.

SOPHISTICATED COMEDY

No one else in our theater, as I have said, is capable of writing sophisticated comedy as well as Philip Barry, though both Arthur Richman and Vincent Lawrence have made their mark in the same field. Mr. Richman's *Heavy Traffic*, reminiscent though it is of the later comedies of Somerset Maugham, is honest and has its moments of sincerity. Mr. Lawrence's *Sour Grapes* and *Among the Married* are both serious attempts to write satirical comedies on marriage, but I feel that this playwright excels in straight comedy. If Jesse Lynch Williams had been twenty years younger he might have written his *Why Marry?* with a surer skill and less dependence on the shaky technique of Bernard Shaw. Harry Wagstaff Gribble, S. N. Behrman and Samson Raphaelson, particularly the last-named, have all tried their hand at smart comedy, and of the three Mr. Raphaelson has come nearest to success;

Young Love, for all its brittle unreality, is a brilliant work. Mr. Behrman's *Second Man* is not nearly so good as his *Serena Blandish*, though its technical finish is in itself a pretty thing. In *Meteor* there is promise of new developments in this dramatist, but a disappointing lack of technical efficiency.

Rachel Crothers is another who has tried her hand at depicting the smart set. But *Let Us Be Gay*, like nearly all of Zoe Akins' pastiches, is a synthetic play.

What these dramatists have done with the wealthy, the idle, the neurasthenic and affected, seems of relatively small interest to me, because the characters they show us are either not familiar or quite uninteresting.

What is more significant at this moment in the development of our national drama is that we are getting more and better plays than we ever had by every sort of writer, about every sort of person, and laid in every part of the country.

CONTEMPORARY LIFE

It would be easy to choose fifty plays written since 1920 each one of which shows some

phase of modern life worth knowing, and taken in the aggregate, all presenting a fairly complete picture of our life as it is now being lived. A few random examples:

Bartlett Cormack's *The Racket*, first of the crook melodramas to show us real policemen and credible crooks—primarily an exciting show, but no less fascinating as a satire on city government. (Chicago politicians have so far prevented the play from being shown in their city.)

Spread Eagle, by George S. Brooks and Walter B. Lister, a live if not altogether satisfying play about Wall Street and Mexico. Mr. Brooks has other plays up his sleeve. I shall watch for them hopefully.

Chicago, a satire on the law by Maurine Watkins. Miss Watkins writes with immense gusto.

Seed of the Brute, a small-town domestic tragedy by Knowles Entrikin, wherein the "best people" are stripped to their skins. Mr. Entrikin, a student of Ibsen, has given us something of the flavor of *John Gabriel Borkman* and the *Spoon River Anthology*.

Wild Birds, by Dan Totheroh, drama and poetry, a play of great promise by a man

young enough to develop in the right direction.

A Man's Man, by Patrick Kearney, for all its affectation of simplicity, gives us some insight into the lives of a white-collar man and his wife.

Coquette, by George Abbott and Ann Preston Bridgers, shows with some honesty but more theatrical trickery a glimpse of life in the new South.

Women Go On Forever, by Daniel Rubin, the *First Year,* by Frank Craven, *The Home Towners,* by George M. Cohan—each, in its own way, represents an effort to get under the surface of the lives of commonplace people.

Exceeding Small, a domestic drama of young people in New York—mostly honest, but with a trace of "theater."

White Man (not yet produced) by Samson Raphaelson, a moving and tragic play about Harlem negroes who "pass" as whites.

More and more our playwrights are looking about them for first-hand material. The best of them are no longer satisfied to invent situations and fit characters into them. Hatcher Hughes knew his people first, and in *Hell-Bent fer Heaven* and *Ruint* let his

situations form themselves about the people. Kenyon Nicholson was impelled by his enthusiasm for human beings to imagine a simple story in *The Barker*, in order to show us a fascinating group of persons. Gilbert Emery did the same thing with *Tarnish*, and Dan Mullally with *Conscience*: Lula Vollmer with *Sun-up*, and Lewis Beach with *Ann Vroome* and *A Square Peg*, and Thomas H. Dickinson with *Winter-Bound*.

These plays are not all masterpieces; many of them are extremely faulty: I would only point out here that these playwrights are headed in the right direction.

The best of them are not theater people; their finest interest is life, not in twisting life to fit the stage, anxious as most of them may be to make a comfortable living out of box-office receipts.

I could go on listing recent plays that approach a more or less satisfactory expression of modern American life, but I don't want to turn these pages into a catalogue. The point is clear, isn't it? The country is pausing to look at itself in all its aspects, and here and there a playwright, a novelist, a poet, a critic, is able to see things clearly and write as he sees.

Too often he sees not clearly enough, or he cannot or will not express with skill and honesty: in other words, we have few artists. No matter, we are making the road a little easier for other playwrights, and widening our horizons.

NEW SUBJECTS

Year by year the boundary lines of our drama are being extended; more and more are the censorious making it easier to use the theater for whatever purpose the artist sees fit. We close *The Captive* on grounds of obscenity and let everyone read the printed text, and in a season or two we are ready for a better and truer play on the same subject. The politicians forbid *Strange Interlude* in Boston, and the Bostonians go to Quincy, a few miles off, to see it. *The Racket* is barred from Chicago theaters, but the *News* prints the text in full, and the bookstores sell several hundred copies of the published play. *The Front Page* is attacked by clergymen for its blasphemous lines and a judge gives it a clean bill of health.

So it goes, and so it will continue to go: suppress anything that has vitality and you

give it a new lease of life. The Society for the Suppression of Vice helped make James Branch Cabell a best-seller. The Wales Law is a standing invitation to writers with guts to break it; and every protest by Right Thinkers is a challenge to the intelligent.

This is all immensely stimulating. When mayors and clergymen, the D. A. R. and the American Legion get wrought up over plays and novels, it means that the plays and novels are beginning to matter.

Life, then, is what we have in our new plays—whether well understood and described or not isn't the question just now. We aren't wholly satisfied now with the kind of thing that used to pass in the theater so long as it gave actors a chance to show what they could do. The best of our plays are not written to exploit stars; the stars (thank heaven their number is diminishing), must usually accommodate themselves to the play.

Here I am again tempted to digress into a commentary on several plays that might confirm my statement, but I must remind myself that this booklet is a collection of notes and not a history. I have other dramatists to write about, and the future in

general to consider, besides sundry other matters to touch upon in passing.

First as to Paul Green. I take the man's appearance among us as a sign that we are ready for plays transcending in idea and expression anything our native stage has yet seen. I don't claim that the work he has already done is deeper in conception or necessarily finer in execution than the best of O'Neill; I see no need in comparing at all the plays of the younger man and the older. O'Neill blazed the trail for Green, making it possible for the man from North Carolina to think and work in terms of drama. In other words, Mr. Green was able to use the play form because O'Neill had proved he could be a dramatist without being a slave to the theater, and both men have recently written with the idea in mind that if the theater can't cope with their work, so much the worse for the theater. O'Neill has expressed this to me in letters, and Green only a year ago wrote in a preface that for the present he preferred "books to footlights."

It is only when men who, though knowing the stage, put upon it a burden greater than it has ever borne *and still seek to use it*, that the theater can grow. So long as

playwrights stood in awe of managers, actors and the silly Rules, they were slaves and not masters.

PAUL GREEN

I am not even sure that Paul Green is a literary man at all, in the sense that most writers of good books are literary; the word denotes something self-conscious and arranged, something professional that is conspicuously absent from his most successful work. In reading him I am stirred by no formal pattern of art or rearrangement of human characteristics: the stories in *Wide Fields* and the play *In Abraham's Bosom* seem like direct transcriptions of the lives of men and women whose hearts are laid bare in all their simplicity; *Tread the Green Grass* and *In the Valley* are poetic revelations as well as descriptions; *The Field God* and *The Hot Iron* are untouched pictures drawn with passion and gusto, set down without factitious decoration.

That these stories and plays are the work of an untutored son of the soil is untrue, but that they are not spoiled by the artifice that mars much of our contemporary writ-

ing, I am certain. For in Green's opinion "living itself giveth something better than art. . . . Even now," he has said, "when I go down home among my folks, negroes and whites, I feel a definite loss in that they, too, don't always view me as one of the tribe of Benjamin." He had been writing about these folks; most of them knew it, and were perhaps a little fearful of a strange power that was his.

"Not so long ago," he wrote me a couple of years ago, "I was back on the farm. I went into the cornfield, where ten or twelve negroes were pulling fodder. As I came up to them Duncan, a zealous dusky preacher, let out a cry, 'There's Mr. Paul!' Another one farther off shouted, 'Lawd, here he is! Glad you come. We sho' needing fodder hands.' Then another, 'And dat man kin sho' harvest it. Why, he useter could pull fodder land lak a whirlwind.' Duncan replied, 'He kin do it now, I betcha.' "

He was born and bred on a farm where he lived up to the age of twenty-two. He was one of the first to introduce tobacco farming into his neighborhood. "I spent," he said, "$300 on making my crop and sold it for $19. After paying warehouse charges and cartage, I had $8 left over, which I spent for three or four books. So ended my tobacco farming."

The cultivation of tobacco and cotton and association with workers in the fields were not the incidental activities of a farm boy who later on turned his early experiences to literary uses.

"Back with my own folks, and I mean black and white," he once wrote me, ". . . I can't help feeling that they are experiencing life that no art can compass. . . . There among them I felt at home as I'll never feel at home elsewhere. The smell of their sweaty bodies, the gusto of their indecent jokes, the knowledge of their twisted philosophies, the sight of their feet entangled among the pea vines and grass, their shouts, grunts and bellyachings, the sun blistering down upon them and the rim of the sky enclosing them forever, all took me wholly, and I was one of them—neither black nor white, but one of them, children of the moist earth underfoot."

Three years ago, before I had met him, he sent me a little who's who of himself—reluctantly, I think, for publicity confuses and embarrasses him. Here is the paragraph I got:

Born on a farm near Lillington, N. C., March 17, 1894. Farmed in the spring and summer and went to country school a few months in the winter. Later went to Buie's Creek Academy, from which he was graduated in 1914. Taught country school two years. Entered the University of North Carolina in 1916. Enlisted in the army in 1917. Served as private, corporal, sergeant and sergeant-major with the 105th

Engineers, 30th Division. Later as second lieutenant with the Chief of Engineers at Paris. Served four months on the Western front. Returned to the University of North Carolina in 1919. Was graduated from there in 1921. Did graduate work at his alma mater and at Cornell University. At present is a member of the faculty at the University of North Carolina.

He is now an assistant professor in philosophy, but for the last half of 1928 and nearly all of 1929 he was on leave of absence on a Guggenheim Fellowship in Europe with his wife and children.

Since the spring of 1926 I have been able to supplement the biographical notes with a few more details:

"My first memories," he writes, "are of negro ballads ringing out by moonlight and the rich laughter of the resting blacks, down by the river bottom. I started out very close to life—in the elemental. . . . We were landowners, a class distinguished from the tenant farmers, but for all that we earned our living by labor in the fields—my father and brothers and I. Everybody farmed there, and though we were comparatively well-off, we were no exception to the rule. As a child I worked out-of-doors, spring, summer and fall, and went to school a few months each winter."

The money he had been able to save from his salary as teacher helped defray expenses at Chapel Hill, and in the summer he played semi-professional baseball around down home.

The year after he came to the "Hill" he published his first book, if a slender art-leather pamphlet of verse can be called a book.

Trifles of Thought by P. E. G., is not a brilliant performance. Many a susceptible youth with a knack for meter and rhyme who has read Kipling and Riley could do as well if he set his hand to it. This little collection comprises the usual eulogies and epitaphs, war verses and a few dialect pieces.

The writing of his first play is a matter of considerable interest. The first play of any kind Paul Green ever saw acted was a one-acter he himself had written as a freshman for a prize competition at the University. It had to do with "a Southern gal's heart surrender to a Yankee captain, in opposition to her father's wishes." To his great surprise this play won the competition, and the senior class produced it at commencement time. The author was in the audience and "the life and blood of the thing" in action on the stage frightened him, and he got up and left. "I couldn't endure the attention directed at me and with what horror I heard whispers as I made my stumbling way over feet and forms—'Here he is!', 'There he

goes!' And then the awful giggles and titters that smote upon my tingling ears! I aged considerably before I reached the dark peace of my little old room in the western end of town. That experience was what could be called exquisite anguish. Before writing this I had read only one play and part of another—all of *Hamlet* and part of *Julius Cæsar.*"

In 1918 no plays were written. During that year Green was fighting at the front in Belgium. His experiences under fire have not yet been written down; they are still too vivid, I think, and he will say little about them.

On his return to the University in 1919 he took work under Frederick H. Koch, founder of the Carolina Playmakers. The "Prof," as he is familiarly known, encouraged him to use the rich folk material that lay everywhere about.

It is Professor Koch's chief merit that he is able to stimulate his students to write about the people and scenes they know best. He is too wise to try to "teach" any system of dramatic technique. His students ask advice and consult him and their fellow-workers, and when a script is ready it is acted

by the Playmakers. "I haven't any dramatic technique," Mr. Green told an interviewer, "I merely tell the story, episode by episode. It seems to me absurd to try to force a story into a definite mold, demanding three well-divided scenes, with a climax for each curtain and a cut-and-dried denouement."

In 1920 Mr. Green wrote *The Last of the Lowries*, one of the most popular of the Carolina folk-plays. It is hardly to be wondered at that his early work should be somewhat imitative: the plot resembles *Riders to the Sea*, but in all justice to the American, I must say that Mr. Green's play is based upon local history.

Two other plays followed in the same year, *Old Wash Lucas* and *The Old Man of Edenton*, the one a character sketch and the other a melodrama.

Then, also in 1920, came *White Dresses*. This was the first of his plays to show signs of genius. It is a sort of prologue to what he wants to make a part of his life work, "the story to be gradually written down in stories, plays, and novels of my home folks, black and white." This is a moving incident about a negro girl in love with a white man.

For the first time, I believe, a dramatist has taken a negro theme almost as old as our literature, and cast it into a play that is at once actable as drama and worth something as literature. Mr. Green knows his negroes, and like Synge, he has made use of the commonest words and phrases, molding them into a living speech. But unlike the Irishman, there is not a trace of "fine" writing here. The purple patches of Synge sometimes betray the self-conscious writer striving for literary effects.

The next negro play was not written until after the composition of several "White" dramas, one-acters of varying merit, some of them, like *The Lord's Will*, rather interesting if conventional, and others, like *Round and Round*, which were no more than experimental exercises.

The second of his characteristic negro plays is *The Prayer Meeting*. This is first of all a work of art, a human and not a sociological document. Mr. Green cares a good deal as a man about the plight of the negro, but his concern here is first with human beings as individuals, and not as members of an oppressed race. The play is a revelation of hidden corners in the soul and mind of the

black man. With an unerring instinct Mr. Green has taken a situation which he found ready-made. He never invents or builds a plot; life itself is prodigal of situations, and he always goes direct to life for his material.

The negro's effort to better himself through education is the basis of a one-act play called *In Abraham's Bosom*. It would be so easy to sentimentalize over Abraham's plight, and look upon the play as a document; but there is practically nothing in it besides the human struggle. Though he treats the specific problems of the American negro, Mr. Green knows instinctively that the greatest of all problems man must face as a human being—and alone.

What he scarcely more than touched on in the one-act play, he has developed in a tragedy that is almost epic in the simple grandeur of its successive episodes. The full-length work, also called *In Abraham's Bosom*, is one of the most beautiful and tragic of our modern plays. The character of Abraham is carried through seven scenes, each showing a crisis in the protagonist's heartbreaking struggle to widen his mental horizon. With the help of his white father he is enabled to do some studying; he even succeeds in

opening a small school for negroes. But every time he seems on the point of success, he finds himself thwarted. Now, his tragedy is not altogether the tragedy of the negro in a white man's world; as a matter of fact, his failure lies within himself; it is attributable to his shortcomings as a man. If Abraham had not been a negro he would still have had to face the same obstacles that precipitate his tragic failure. That is why the play is more than just a folk-play about negroes. We are conscious of no effort to solve the problem; it is Mr. Green's business to state it in human terms. Abraham remains a pitiful and tragic figure, held down by the limitations inherent in him and in his fellowmen, black as well as white.

"Doubtless," says the author in the preface to *Lonesome Road*, "readers of these plays will object that they are not generally representative of the negro race. They are not meant to be. Specifically, the chief concern here is with the more tragic and uneasy side of negro life as it has exhibited itself to my notice through a number of years on or near a single farm in the coastal plain of North Carolina." Not long after writing this, he added in a personal letter that he "grew up on a farm and for twenty-three years saw nothing else."

But what Mr. Green has seen and experienced and felt, he knows and can make

into plays and stories. He may be familiar with no more than a few acres of the county where he was born, but from within that area he has been able to draw the inspiration that animates his work. The author of *Abraham* and *Lonesome Road* is so "conscious of the marvel of being alive," and so sensitive to the form and pressure of his time, that the sandy expanses and low-lying hills, the dark rivers and sleepy villages of his native district are a whole world to him.

Of the other negro plays in *Lonesome Road* one—*Your Fiery Furnace*—is another arrangement of a scene from the full-length drama *In Abraham's Bosom*. The other two, *The Hot Iron* and *The End of the Row*, stand at the apex of Mr. Green's achievement in the one-act form. In *The End of the Row* we have Abraham's problem again, of the negro who strives to better his condition, but in this case it is further complicated by the problem of sex.

The Hot Iron is one of the most moving one-acters I know. With the simplest elements and scarcely an episode by way of plot, the dramatist has transferred vividly to his few pages a tragic group of negroes—a man, a woman, and their children.

Mr. Green stands almost alone among our younger playwrights as a man who can touch with equal skill the lighter side of life, and the tragedy of it. There are two plays, quite as good in their way though not so somber in mood, as the best in *Lonesome Road*. *The Man Who Died at Twelve O'Clock* is a delicious bit of grotesque horseplay, genuine, imaginative, poetic.

In Aunt Mahaly's Cabin is described as a negro melodrama. The scene is reminiscent of *The Emperor Jones*, but it is elaborated by the introduction of a world of demonology in the shape of ghostly apparitions. The play is not so much a study of panic fear as a fantasy on a variety of negro themes. There is less conscious art in it than there is in O'Neill's play, and more of the folk element. It is an elaborate pageant of dramatized folklore.

The last of the first group of negro plays is probably the best-known of all Mr. Green's one-acters, *The No 'Count Boy*. Different from anything else he has done, this idyl is an appealing poetic play.

In my preface to *Lonesome Road*, written four years ago, I had said that it was "to be expected that such poignant and heartbreak-

ing tragedies as the full-length version of *In Abraham's Bosom* should frighten the average producer; and, after all it does take time for any original dramatist to reach Broadway. But . . . sooner or later Mr. Green's plays will be produced professionally, reaching the public that wants to see them."

Both *In Abraham's Bosom* and *The Field God* were sent in MS. to every producer who might conceivably have been able to use them. Finally the Experimental Theater at the Provincetown Playhouse took the first, and Edwin R. Wolfe, unknown to Broadway as a producer, took the other. On December 30, 1926, *Abraham* was produced under Jasper Deeter's direction in Macdougal Street, where it ran for several weeks. Though the business was fairly good, it was forced to close in the early spring. Then in May Mr. Green received the Pulitzer Award, and was damned all over again by a few prominent critics, some of whom had not even bothered to go and see the production. But Mr. Hammond and Mr. Atkinson and one or two others courageously upheld the verdict. And this did take courage, for *Abraham*, in spite of its moderate success, was not a popular Broadway hit. But there was

something in it that nothing could kill, and the play was revived again in May, and two or three times after that.

The Field God was first tried out in April 1927, and attracted some attention during its short run in New York at the Greenwich Village and Cort Theaters.

Before he put the finishing touches on his latest full-length plays Mr. Green gathered into a single volume, *In The Valley*, eleven one-acters, some of which had been published before, and some of which had been written recently. In *Quare Medicine* and *Unto Such Glory* he tried his hand at folk comedy; these are rollicking farces full of good-natured fun. Here, as in *The Man Who Died at Twelve O'Clock*, the humor is rowdy, earthy, occasionally dirty, a bit Rabelaisian. But Mr. Green knows that everything "belongs" if it reveals the humanity of human beings. He can use words and expressions in themselves revolting, but in the play or story where he has put them they become an organic part of a harmonious whole. Mr. Green enjoys indecency, because men and women have so much of it in their make-up.

Supper for the Dead and *The Man on the House*, on the other hand, are poetic and

imaginative pieces, somber and tragic, haunting and fantastic. *The Goodbye*, a brief scene, and *The Picnic*, like *Saturday Night*, are vignettes etched with extraordinary skill. *In the Valley*, a long one-act tragedy, is one of his most beautiful studies of negro life.

The three long plays, *Tread the Green Grass*, *The House of Connelly*, and *Potter's Field*, are his latest. The Provincetown people were to have produced the first, and the Theater Guild has announced the second. *Tread the Green Grass* is a remarkable work (how can I call it a play? it is so much more than that). It is what Mr. Green calls a "little exercise." In it he has tried to illustrate a text he thought of some time ago: "In such environments sensitive souls are often driven mad." He has sought to shadow forth a somewhat fantastic interpretation of a young and delicately attuned country girl going mad through dreams and fears. Her excitable imagination has been fed on folk legends and religion, and these are fantastically mingled in her mind, and form the play. It is a Blake-like faery piece, set in a background personified like a Greek legend.

How it is to be produced by the relatively

crude devices of our theater I don't know. Neither does Mr. Green. It may have to be done with the aid of motion pictures or with a speaker or chorus to read parts of it. But this doesn't concern Mr. Green, who writes what he must write; if it is "theater," well and good, if it is not, then let it be printed. If it cannot be printed—well, some other reproducing device must be called in. His work is done when the MS. is complete. It is up to the men of the theater to do what they can.

"My theater," Mr. Green just wrote in the preface to a volume of printed plays, "for the present is the published play. . . . The American professional stage. is an industry and not an art as I had thought. . . . it is a business run to the pattern of supply and demand. . . . Imagination has "taken refuge," he adds, "in mechanics." The theater of pretentiousness, of ingenious devices that seek to compensate for all the beauty that is lacking, is not for him. He sees, however, the promise or the possibility of a New Theater, among elements now scattered and apart in the "Make-Believe of the marionettes," the art gallery, the "cathedral with its mystic chant and pantomime," the concert or circus or athletic field, or between the covers of a book, or in the "movies where Jannings wakes up in his bed the morning after, and Charlie Chaplin walks so exquisitely between two worlds. For in all these now existing somewhat apart. . . . are those elements which some day will receive their proper fusion in the New Theater, the theater of imagination, of lofty

commonsense." But for the present he prefers "books to footlights."

The House of Connelly is far different from *Tread the Green Grass*, yet there is much here that will challenge the producer. He has sought to show men and women in the grip of rot and long-past loyalties, striving to break through, by means of a pagan field-woman's influence, into exuberant and positive living.

The heir of the old proud Connelly family is awakened by Patsy Tate, and in the awakening all the lust of his people is set loose. In such a storm the girl is near to losing all, but she sees a way out, namely to get Will so inflamed that he cannot live without her, and then to stop short, draw away from him and in the end force him through his desire for her to marry her. Then she will have these thousands of acres of glorious earth to do with as she pleases. The land is her love. She wins through, she figures rightly, except that she forgets the creeping, avenging negro women who at the last throw themselves upon her and strangle her.

Both plays are relentlessly tragic, because what interests Mr. Green is character at its richest. He exults in tragedy as the mani-

festation of man living at his intensest, and the intensity of his thirst for life is satisfied with nothing less than life can give him. This is what we call tragedy, and when it is seen through the eyes of an artist of Mr. Green's stamp it is a tragedy that burns and purifies like fire. Yet in spite of the presence of a new power in conjuring beauty from the woods and fields and a wealth of folk-lore, a power he has used in shaping these two poetic plays, I perceive a weakness in some of Mr. Green's later work, which may be no more than a necessary part of his strength. At any rate, he will have to guard against two things: his own personal philosophy of life, and the projection of it, subjectively, into his work. Both *Tread the Green Grass* and *The House of Connelly*, especially the latter, would be more powerful and more deeply tragic if the writer had allowed them to unfold their stories as though they had been inevitable. Instead, he drives home his point with reiterated emphasis, fearing, it seems, that we may be unable to realize the tragic import of what he is setting forth.

Potter's Field is a full-length play practically in one scene, and except for a sort

of "transformation" toward the end, the action is continuous. This is the most completely successful play Mr. Green has ever written. In it he has tried to "give an absolutely true picture of the spirit and philosophy of a certain type of negro life. The play verges towards a sort of opera, and I hope it will be done somewhere by a producer with a feeling for the tragic life that lives in the place called Potter's Field."

This play is in many respects the most amazing and beautiful work ever offered to the theater by a native dramatist, though I'm afraid it may have to wait some time before those who run the theater fully understand and perceive its beauty.

Meantime, ceaselessly is Paul Green following his star, reaping and singing and toiling in the vineyard of the Lord. That he is too much preoccupied at times with the metaphysical riddles of existence and the ways of God with men, I feel is true. I think he has not yet reached his full stature; and that he too often heightens the tragic element in his situations may be due simply to a faulty sense of proportion, a lack of critical self-analysis. I feel certain that in time he will fully understand that it is the artist's

business to paint, to state, to exhibit, and not to argue, to prove or to philosophize.

A poet in the widest sense of the work, Paul Green has already, at the age of thirty-five, laid rich gifts at our feet.

Since Paul Green has written negro plays, and others have done the same thing, one may well ask about our negro drama as a separate entity. But, in spite of negro plays and playwrights, there is no negro drama. The best plays about negroes have been written by whites: the earliest of these were, I think, the poetic plays of Ridgely Torrence; then came Ernest H. Culbertson's *Goat Alley* and Nan Bagley Stephens' *Roseanne*, and lately the Du Bose Heywards' semi-operatic *Porgy*. The negro writers have so far done creditable work only with one-acters. Willis Richardson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Eulalie Spence and Frank Wilson, have yet to prove that they can handle the full-length form.

While Paul Green among our newer and more original writers may be said to have gained some sort of audience, there are several dramatists of varying talent who may be classed as promising, and one outstanding

man of extraordinary gifts—Lynn Riggs. A few words now on the others.

THE NEWER WRITERS

Daniel L. Rubin has written forty-six plays, four of which have been produced. He was born in Charleston, South Carolina, where he spent his boyhood. Except for a couple of years in the army during the War, he has been engaged almost continuously in newspaper work, though for a time he tried his hand at fiction.

"Having no contact of any kind with the practical theater, never having been backstage until my first play was produced in 1926, I worked blindly all these years. Failure has never affected me, merely because the desire to say something in terms of drama is so insatiable I couldn't suppress it, even if I wanted to."

Devils, his first produced play, is a study in religious fanaticism, somber and tense in its best scenes, but it is weakened by the writer's too-evident intention to drive home his point; this in spite of his statement that "my feeling for the theater is in no sense moralistic, it is too highly intellectualised."

My enthusiasm for Mr. Rubin and my belief in his future are based principally on

Women Go On Forever, which had a short run on Broadway a couple of seasons ago.

This play is a deliberately compressed parable of life, sordid, humorous, tragic, preposterous. Before our eyes a man is murdered, a couple are wedded, and (almost before our eyes), bedded; a blind boy shoots a man and is seduced by an ugly old maid; a girl is brought home by a man so drunk that she cannot meet her fiancé, who goes to sleep upstairs; a divorcee, having lost her latest lover only a few hours before, and having caused the murder of another man, makes love to a newcomer she has never set eyes on. These are actually only a small part of the things that happen in Daisy Bowman's boarding-house within twelve hours. Here is a panorama of birth and love and death, of violent and pitiful struggle, of hatred and folly, infatuation and deception. But wherein is all this made humanly significant? To begin with, it is done in the manner of the realists. There is no Veiled Figure, no One in Black to point out sententiously what it means; and there are no program notes. The audience are asked to watch things happen, drawing whatever conclusions they please.

Mr. Rubin has caught something of the

harmony of the life he has chosen to transpose to the theater, and reproduced it.

Martin Flavin is young only in the sense that his first play, *Children of the Moon*, is comparatively recent. Like his *Lady of the Rose*, this work has power, and like the unproduced *Spindrift*, a technical finish that is admirable. *The Criminal Code*, one of his latest plays, is simpler and more effective than anything else he has done, but in the somewhat conventional *Cross-Roads* there are two scenes that inspire the hope that Flavin will some day write without thinking of his effects, and let his characters make their own story.

Burdette J. Kinne, an instructor in French at Columbia, is the author of three plays not one of which has yet been professionally produced. *B.A., B.A., Black Sheep* was announced for a couple of seasons by the Theater Guild, and then dropped. *The Fatted Calf* was bought by Brock Pemberton, and nothing more happened. *The New York Virgin* has still to find a bidder.

Mr. Kinne's earliest play is a fantastic satirical comedy on college life, the first of its kind I've ever read. Like *The Fatted Calf*, it is a brilliant essay in debunking. If the

dramatist is able to develop his considerable gift of wit and his sense of human character, and allow his plots to take care of themselves, he will write even better plays than he has written. Meantime, he deserves encouragement and recognition in the concrete form of production.

Marie Baumer—aged twenty-three—is just beginning, though she first set to work at least four years ago. In spite of the disastrous "flop" of *Town Boy* in the fall of 1929, that little play had a great deal to it, as anyone knows who saw it tried out by Knowles Entrikin at Scarborough-on-Hudson in the spring of the same year, under the title of *Strength*. Miss Baumer has an eye to character, and because of her very honesty as an artist she refuses to complicate her plots by hokum devices, which by the way, she is good at. *Blind Spot*, one of her earliest plays, is about to be produced, but her best, *Clancy*, has not yet been contracted for.

Miss Baumer will "arrive" in good time, but from what she says about herself, I am sure she will never sacrifice her best gifts in order to put over stage successes.

Though he was for a time too much interested in such purely technical matters as Expressionistic production, Em Jo Basshe must not be judged alone by such juvenile efforts as *Adam Solitaire,* first produced by The Provincetowners four or five years ago. Both *The Centuries* and *Earth* show other aspects of a varied talent.

Like Mr. Basshe, Michael Gold comes of a family of Russian-Jewish immigrants. And like John Howard Lawson and John Dos Passos, he has striven to express vividly the sordidness of city life in terms of what has been called Expressionism. But all these writers seem at last to have learned that a formula that may on occasion suit Walter Hasenclever or Arnolt Bronnen, Elmer Rice or Ernst Toller, cannot successfully be used for every play. Mr. Gold's *Hoboken Blues* and *Fiesta* are proof enough that this earnest-minded young man is doing his best to express a strange kind of beauty. But, like Dos Passos, Basshe, Lawson, and Francis Faragoh, author of *Pinwheel,* he has not yet wholly succeeded.

Nor has E. E. Cummings, whose *him* was directed by James Light at The Provincetown Playhouse in 1928. Cummings' pecul-

iar talent, which is slight, is not for or of the theater.

All these writers have something to say, but they have spent too much time in deliberate attempts to express the obvious in terms of the bizarre.

TWO STILL NEWER MEN: CONKLE AND GEDDES

At the other extreme are two young writers, both of them from Nebraska—E. P. Conkle and Virgil Geddes. Conkle is just thirty. Until he was nineteen he had not traveled more than twenty miles from home, home being a typical Nebraska small town. For a short time he taught English at the University of North Dakota, and then went to Yale for study under Professor Baker. Not long ago he felt himself "rather seriously handicapped," he wrote, because of "a lack of experience" that would come with travel. "I believe," he went on, "that the writer of plays of even so limited a nature [i.e., as his own] should have that cosmopolitan outlook that comes through contact at many places over the world." When these words were written Mr. Conkle believed he was so

close to his material that he "couldn't recognize its worth in a larger way. It seems so homely and commonplace to me. But not uninteresting."

I have good reason to think that since this was written he has changed his mind. Nearly all his long plays are concerned with the homely and commonplace people and scenes he so well knows. And who are these people? Tillers of the soil who drive teams of horses, and not tractors. They came from Illinois and Indiana, some even from Virginia and North Carolina. Their quaint and sometimes rich idiomatic speech, like their religion and their philosophy, have now almost disappeared. They didn't read much, Mr. Conkle tells me, "but they were wise. And they have now been relegated to the past, along with their coal-oil lamps, their spring buckboards and their homespun clothes. Their daughters and sons are ashamed of them. I've known and loved these people and have thought them worth recording. They shouldn't be doomed to the great oblivion that is to engulf the rest of us."

Mr. Conkle's one-acters, collected into a volume called *Crick Bottom Plays*, are evi-

dence enough of a new note he has brought into our native drama. He has opened a rich vein of material, and even now, before any of his long plays are published or produced, he has proved that he can exhibit and illuminate his characters with skill and a sure sense of human values.

He has, besides, a delightful sense of comedy, as original and incisive as Philip Barry's. Some day *Forty-nine Dogs in the Meathouse* will create a sensation, but that is only the first of six I have read during the past six years.

Virgil Geddes was born on a farm in Dixon County, Nebraska, in 1897, where he lived until he was over twenty-one. He attended country schools irregularly, and as a youth went to Chicago to read proof for a newspaper.

Then four years more in Paris, doing the same thing. Over there he published two small volumes of verse.

"My first effort in playwriting," he tells me, "came about in a rather curious manner. While riding on a bus with my friend Eliot Paul, I happened to say to him, 'There can't be anything to the notion that only people connected with the theater can write good plays.' 'No,' he answered. 'It is just the opposite.' And I immediately began writing my first play, *The*

Frog. This was in 1926. It was produced by the Boston Stage Society in 1927."

Since then Mr. Geddes has written eleven plays. *The Earth Between* was produced by The Provincetowners and brilliantly directed by James Light in the spring of 1929. This is a solemnly beautiful series of eight episodes telling the story of Nat Jennings and his daughter Floy. Two farmhands, one of them a relative, are attracted to the girl, who is fond of Jake; but Nat drives the boy out of the house into the barn, where he falls ill and dies. Then Wilbur, the other boy, leaves. Nat has been left a widower and is jealously attached to Floy, who returns his love in a strange manner, which may be somewhat more than daughterly. At the end the two are standing in a wheatfield, content and happy in their quiet passion. It is possible to read into the situation a hint of some sort of reversed Œdipus Complex, but this is not necessary. Mr. Geddes doesn't explain it, because in the minds of Nat and Floy there is no introspective confusion. Nat has just transferred to the girl something of what he lost when his wife died.

A stark and simple picture, or rather a series of pictures. This short play is far from perfect; the telling of it is not subtle, and the writer has compressed too much in his effort to let the facts speak for themselves. In his later plays, especially *Native Ground*, *Mud on the Hoofs*, and *As the Crow Flies*, he is more articulate. This last, by the way, has just been bought by the Provincetowners—another proof that these people are still alive. Or *were*—shortly before their backers burned their fingers in Wall Street.

Mr. Geddes just finished two more plays a few days after the Provincetowners went out of business, one of which is far better than anything else he has done; but who, I wonder, will try out *Behind the Night*?

In other words, Mr. Geddes is a man whose passion for showing simple farm-folk in moments of intensity is so strong that he is a little afraid to indulge it. But he is learning, and when he is able to suggest all that he knows and feels, and understands a little more of the idiom he has chosen, we shall have another playwright—like O'Neill and Green, Barry, Howard and Riggs—who is an artist to be reckoned with.

LYNN RIGGS

And now for Lynn Riggs. He was born in 1899 on a farm near Claremore, then Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Most of his early youth he spent in the neighborhood of his birthplace. His first reading included the books of Horatio Alger and the more lurid masterpieces built round the figure of Diamond Dick. His first paid job was driving a grocery store delivery-wagon. He has worked in glass factories and express offices, sung in a movie house, acted in the movies, sold books in Macy's and read proof for the *Wall Street Journal*. Before attending the University of Oklahoma he had been to the Far West and spent some time in New York as well. His earliest literary work was verse, much of which was printed in *Poetry*, *The Nation* and *The Smart Set*. After his first year in college, he taught freshman English for a short time. In 1921 he wrote a farce and the next year toured the Middle West as second tenor in a quartet on the chautauqua circuit. On recovering, he went to Santa Fé to work on a ranch. In 1925 his one-act play, *Knives From Syria*, was produced by the Santa Fé Players. Then he set

to work in earnest and wrote *Sump'n Like Wings* and *Big Lake*. In 1926 he came East and went on writing plays and poetry, though he still had to do more practical kinds of work in order to make a living. In 1927 *Big Lake* was produced for a couple of weeks by the American Laboratory Theater and published shortly after.

Meantime *Sump'n Like Wings* and *A Lantern to See By* were contracted for by managers of semi-professional groups, and then dropped. *Sump'n Like Wings*, though, had first been bought by Kenneth Macgowan for the Actors' Theater in 1925. At the present moment (December, 1929), it is scheduled for production during the season of 1929-30.

In spite of hopes dashed, raised again and again disappointed, Mr. Riggs went on writing. *Rancor* was produced by Jasper Deeter at the Hedgerow Theater near Philadelphia eighteen months ago, and is now one of the best things in his repertory.

In the spring of 1928 the Shuberts put on *The Domino Parlor* for a week's tryout in Newark. It was badly miscast, and because Riggs refused to let the MS. be tinkered with, nothing more was done about it.

But before this was written, *The Lonesome West* had been going the rounds; a few managers here and there said nice things about it, but no one wanted to pay money to secure an option.

A year in Europe (1928-29) enabled him to write his most colorful and elaborate play, *Green Grow the Lilacs,* which was bought by the Theater Guild soon after its completion, and is now scheduled for early production.

Riggs' latest play, *Borned in Texas* (also called *Roadside*), was finished only a few weeks ago, but has just been bought by Arthur Hopkins. This is a carefree and uproarious Rabelaisian frolic.

The first of the Riggs plays I ever read was *Big Lake.* That was in 1926, and I was not very enthusiastic over it. Too crude, I thought; there was something the matter with the ending; I tried to put it out of my mind. But it would not stay put, and when Winifred Katzin, who made it her business to call my attention to the slender quiet-voiced youth who wrote it, asked me to look at other MSS.; I did so. Then I re-read *Big Lake,* saw I had been mistaken, and went to see it acted by students of the American

Laboratory Theater in April 1927. In August of the same year I tried to make amends in a preface to the printed book, where I wrote:

Big Lake is that rarest of things, a poetic drama that is at once poetry and drama. To one of his later plays Mr. Riggs has given the title *Sump'n Like Wings,* and I can think of no words that so accurately describe what I felt when, over a year ago, I read [for the second time!] the manuscript of *Big Lake.* There is a winged lightness in the words that the poet puts into the mouths of his young people, an ecstasy born of the sheer joy of being alive. How poor a thing is the mere "observation" of a clever playwright beside the deeper, more incisive and highly intuitive scenes in *Big Lake*!

In calling Mr. Riggs a poet (I refer here not to his formal verse-making, but to his plays) I am not forgetting that poetry in the theater is a different thing from the poetry you read in a book: Mr. Riggs' plays are stage pieces; the poetry in them is never a matter of mere words, but an integral part of the speeches uttered and the gestures made by the characters, directing each scene and permeating the whole. It lies first in the writer's conception of a harmonic entity, and floods it from beginning to end.

Mr. Riggs' three full-length plays are the work of a young man who is still close enough to his youth to remember and understand those fleeting moments of exaltation and depression that constitute the chief glory and the tragedy of adolescence. In *Big Lake,* more especially than in *A Lantern to See By* and *Sump'n Like Wings,* Mr. Riggs has been able on occasion to look at the world about him through the eyes of a

child: can you not feel in the second scene of the first act something of the wonder and terror of the more wildly romantic stories of the Brothers Grimm?

If this foreword were a study, I should go on to point out how Lynn Riggs has taken the folk-material and the idiom of his native district and skilfully made of them a rich medium of expression and explain how, with only the slightest technical manipulation, he has reproduced the subtle rhythms of everyday speech. Then I should also have to take him to task for an occasional awkwardness in the management of his plots. But my purpose here is not to criticize: it is to point out to you a new American dramatist, whose work is permeated by an odd and strangely haunting beauty.

Nearly three years have passed since I wrote that, and Riggs is still unknown to the public. Fortunately the Theater Guild, after showing rather too much interest in the plays of the foreigners, is now occasionally turning to native writers; it has not only produced the work of such established men as O'Neill, but it was among the first to bring out the plays of John Howard Lawson, Sidney Howard, and S. N. Behrman. By taking Green's *House of Connelly* and Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and showing that it is willing to produce the work of a young and practically unknown American, the Guild is fulfilling one of its most important functions.

AND NOW WHERE ARE WE?

We are now in the midst of something that is so much alive that we can't see it all, or describe more than a little of it at a time.

There is much the matter with our theater —mismanagement, absentee and other forms of indirect ownership, stupidity and cupidity —but when all is said it remains a theater where men like O'Neill and Howard, Barry and Green, Riggs and Kelly can say their say, where artists can manage to exhibit their wares side by side with the wares of such playwrights as Anne Nichols and Channing Pollock. It is a theater that has its superstitions, but very few prejudices.

What we need most, I think, is deflation: fewer theaters, fewer fly-by-night producers, and no speculation; much more experiment, and a desire on the part of those engaged in the business to make not fortunes but a fair return on their investment.

And there is no reason why New York should remain the theatrical capital of the land. If our Little Theaters could once realize their power, if they would stop trying to imitate Broadway, if their directors would behave as though Broadway never existed, we

should soon have a nation-wide theater ready to give every new playwright a chance to express himself at home. Every Little Theater of any standing has had a chance to bring out the plays of Green and Riggs—to mention only two of the newer men—and not one of them took it.

Read John Anderson's wise and amusing book, *Box Office*, where you will find this sentence:

"*Variety*, the showman's bible, announced with some alarm, apparently, that the little theaters would have the 'legit by the throat ten years from now.' The ten years have passed, and at most the little theaters seem to have the legit by its coat-tails."

So long as New York alone does the trying out, no provincial theater can claim a very important place in the theater world, and so long as this is so, I don't see how we can grow. It is hard to be courageous in our present theatrical capital, and it's still harder to raise the money necessary to go experimenting. When the Provincetown Playhouse was in Macdougal Street the whole budget was about $30,000 a year; uptown at the Garrick it was about a quarter of a million. But what about Chicago and Los Angeles,

Detroit and Davenport, Spokane and Gum Stump, Pennsylvania? Out in the provinces lies our chance to develop, but we are afraid of being thought provincial. I should like to see that word used to denote distinction and originality, and borne as a mark of particular honor.

THE END

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DEC 15
APR 6
OCT 27
MAY 30 '46
June 7
OCT 27 '50

NOV 4 '48
MAY 14 '52
NOV 30 '66
NOV 22 '67
MAY 13 '70

812.09 C547h AVLL
Clark, Barrett Harp/An hour of American
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